Charles Morice

What's at Play in Literature Today?

Translated from the French
by
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in collaboration with
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First English Translation

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Translation 2025. by Claude AI (Anthropic)
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Portrait of the Poet Charles Morice
by Eugène Carrière

Note to the Reader

Those who seek a work of criticism in these pages will be disappointed: disappointed too will be those who expect to find here the manifesto of a new School.

There are no longer any literary schools, there are only individual manifestations. Three writers in agreement on principles—this is something we shall see no more; and even should they manage to come to terms, they would not constitute a school, for the enterprise, always somewhat theatrical, would lack an audience in this age of indifference and would moreover be betrayed even by its own actors, who would all know the same role and know only that one—the role of the protagonist.

Here, then, only the author's responsibility is engaged. His name conceals no group. His ideas on the tendencies of present-day youth, on the influences to which it is subject, on the new direction one should wish for the art of writing, and on the intimations of these novelties found in the monuments raised before us by the Masters —all these ideas, he says, true or false, are his own. Even the features, scattered here and there, which he believes common to the entire rising generation, it is he who claims them as such, and such they might well be only in his claims. Nevertheless he is convinced of being right: but one may find good minds precisely convinced of doctrines contrary to his own—which have, no doubt, the grave fault of not being advanced with that fine scientific disinterestedness befitting, it is true, to scholars, but which is hardly the province of a Poet.

Let it be declared: that all the assertions of this book, all the principles defended therein, and all the developments of this exposition of principles have no other aim than to indicate on what logical grounds are founded the realizations that will not fail to follow closely upon this theoretical preface. It is a sort of precaution it seemed honest and prudent to take.

The true orientation of this *Literature* is thus established by its Fifth Part, where doctrines appear only as commentaries on a future Work. The real point of view is that of the Poet: not that of the aesthete! The theory will be worth as much as the Work.

Ch. M.

On Truth and Beauty

I

The democratic rabble is not the Crowd. Ignorant and naive, the Crowd joyfully commits and submits its numberless forces to acclaimed leaders, and it is the Crowd—in service to ideas it adores without understanding them—that has driven the great movements of history. It is the Crowd too, in its obscurity, that bestows what it does not possess: Glory. And it is the Crowd again, true as childhood, yielding to Fiction as the forest yields to wind, that thrills to the poets' profound emotions, that listens, believes, gilds with the sincerity of its admiration and perpetuates beautiful legends—the Crowd, Shakespeare's patron. The hollow, clamorous vanity of its individual members characterises the rabble. They know nothing, certainly, neither singly nor collectively, yet they claim, opine, dispute, judge. They have read the newspapers, and their implacable hatred of the Extraordinary sometimes lends them a semblance of logic. They pride themselves on atheism (at bottom, they resent the idea of God for being exceptional) and form a legion of savage Prudhommes with this single word for their entire ideal and gospel: MEDIOCRITY. Such is the fatal product of the "diffusion of enlightenment"—that enormous joke, that monstrous modern ecstasy[tn1]! We should count ourselves fortunate if the *scattering* of light has merely darkened the world's horizon: it might have set it ablaze. But there is a confusion here: diffused light is not clarity; clarity does not allow itself to be dispersed. One may reflect and refract it, but one cannot give the sun a double.

Knowing the rabble's instinct to be contrary to their tendencies, exceptional minds have withdrawn to leave the field clear for the triumphant mob. They remain strangers to all active social manifestation; they scarcely retain any taste save for the speculations of science, philosophy, art and literature. Is it really worth the effort, after all, to attempt directing the rabble? Can democracy be directed? How many years does this society have left? — In these exceptional minds, one senses the century gaining consciousness of itself, wavering between the fear that it stands at the world's twilight and the hope that it stands at a new world's dawn.

In any case, ever since the Crowd has been supplanted by the Public—that aristocracy of the rabble, that collection of people who take it upon themselves to think on their own account and, though it is not their destiny, to pronounce upon everything, possessing necessarily incomplete notions about everything—the Poets (to use this word in its broadest sense) stand condemned to solitude. How indeed could they please (they whom divine Intuition keeps within nature) intelligences corrupted by half-knowledge and cast into artifice? — The Public corrupts all it touches. It has so debased the Language that one might challenge any orator to make himself understood in France today *if he speaks French*, and reading the newspapers is instructive from this perspective[1]. — It has made of the theatre, with the criminal complicity of dramatic authors, the turpitude we all know. Thus, successful playwrights have scarcely any rivals in the shame of popularity save fashionable novelists. — But the very breath of this Public, its very bearing, creates an atmosphere unbreathable for the Poet. These People are loud, sneering, argumentative, positive, utilitarian, cold, irreverent. One cannot take them in with grand words—nor with grand ideas. They harbour the same suspicions of Beauty, for the same reasons, as they do of God. The state of soul essential to understanding any work of art has become impossible for them. It would be foolish and vain to try to make these souls drunk on filth and lucre

understand that to enter a Poet's dream, one must forget the *immediate* interests of daily life, submit to his chosen tones and relations, be initiated into his particular vision, lend him sustained attention. All these efforts demand gifts the world has lost: innocence of spirit, serenity, reflection, freedom from passion—the gift of admiration!

Such were the qualities of the Crowd, and if it did not possess them innately, these were the Graces with which the influence of genius quickened it. It knew how to listen, watch and read, this ignorant Crowd, because it was free from the prejudices of the contemporary Public. It did not go to the theatre seeking the pleasures of happy digestion, but came in search of the great spiritual and sentimental—religious—happiness of a grand forgetting of life's sadness. For the Crowd, Art was precisely *what it did not know*; it venerated in Poets the Magi who kept secrets it did not possess. Our Public addresses the Magi with familiar contempt, believes it knows everything and, from tender attachment to its error, lest it be disabused, recoils in horror from any attempt suspected of novelty. It is pitiful to see the gropings, the precautions, the prudences, all that infinitely small and painful diplomacy to which those who brought a Revelation to art have had to resign themselves when they must live by it—all the sacrifices one must make to the Demon of Concession! One must say that along this path some of the best—yes!—of contemporary writers have descended too low. Thanks to the exaggerated concessions they have made, which naturally result in encouraging and anchoring the stupid Public in its stupid tastes—whether for smut, that thing, alas! so very French, or for the most disgusting sentimentalism—they reduce newcomers to Literature either to finding something *better* still —to please!—in this race towards Nullity, or to adopting some ridiculous posture of protest, of austerity...

Scientists too have been guilty of many wrongs, and whilst maintaining the respect that is their due, these must be stated. Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists had begun that puerile and pernicious work of popularising the sciences: the names crowd upon my pen of writers who, in this century, have continued that task. I know that in the final analysis they cannot be held accountable for the disastrous results they never foresaw; I know that they are animated by good intentions, that they have obeyed that proselytising impulse which causes a new idea, as Carlyle says, to burn in men's minds far more fiercely than gold burns in their pockets. But it is precisely such unreflecting ardours that precipitate societies into their decline. It is deplorable that our scientists have failed to understand that in popularising science they were decomposing it, that to entrust Principles to inferior memories is to expose them to the uncertainties of unauthoritative interpretations, erroneous commentaries, heterodox hypotheses. The Word enclosed in books is dead letter, and the books themselves may perish (yet the current they set in motion, the breath that emanates from them survives them), and what is to be done if they have breathed forth tempests and unleashed darkness? Such indeed is the clearest result of all this mass of popularisation. Through it our scientists are in the process of surrendering back to the great primordial Mystery the hard-won, successive conquests they had made upon it. Perhaps they follow the irresistible impulse of a supreme law, perhaps it is the grand law of Mind that it should return to ignorance today the inventions of yesterday only to reclaim them tomorrow and thus forever keep itself alert, perhaps such must be the history of our civilisation as it was the history of civilisations past. It is the eternal return of organised bodies to their primal elements which will restore them to life. But perhaps also greater prudence would guarantee Science greater longevity, by maintaining the secondary world longer in modesty. Besides, only the immediate results concern me here, and one must acknowledge that the popularisation of the sciences has contributed not a little to

exacerbating people's vanity. Since they have learnt the address of the bookseller who can procure for them at modest prices the explanation of Creation, since they have heard it said that everything reduces to A = B, the arrogance of imbeciles has grown considerably. Why should one speak to them further of the profundity of Myths and the beauty of Fables? They want nothing but formulae now, two and two make four, that's all there is at the bottom of everything—and two and two make four have abolished the Grace of Mind. Mind! As if that were still the question! They want nothing but Intelligence now and, by a symbol all too clear, they have left to esprit—once the divine Spiritus—only the sense of a pun. — It is to this overflow of Science beyond its proper domain, that we owe a particular corruption of language, the invasion of pedantic words. There is no longer any peace for an honest man, since he is exposed to reading, to hearing where they have no business being, barbarous and cold vocables such as *individuation*, *concept*, etc. — From a more particular viewpoint, the popularisers especially of Exegeses are culpable. People have been terribly flattered to learn that Moses was merely a physician, Jesus merely a man—and the level of the world has been lowered thereby. Far more prudent, far more compassionate too towards human weaknesses were the priests of antiquity who kept within the prudent bounds of Esotericism what it was well the populace should not know, and served them beautiful fables wherein Truth wrapped itself in symbols. The ancient civilisations perished precisely from the intrusion of unworthy adepts into the college of Initiates: as ordinary men could not bear the full light of Initiation, they extinguished it. — But how have our moderns, ballasted with all the experience of history, failed to see that the very principle of popularisation is false! It must be *clear* and *definitive*, must it not? And what have they that is so definitive, when their lives are consumed in discussions about first principles? Inevitably, therefore, the scientist who speaks to others than his peers, he who propagates and popularises, is led to lend the authority of dogma to what has only the value of opinion—especially given that he must remain in generalities, without ever descending to that tenebrous depth streaked with lights where one feels Truth shimmer infinitely beneath the finger that presses it. What then is such popularisation but the popularisation of error? And this popularisation, moreover, must be clear, which is to say that the scientist must endeavour to spare the ignorant the pains of initiation. But at such a price Truth would remain incommunicable! By suppressing, between mystery and explanation, the initiation of research, one could only render the explanation itself mysterious. And this is what occurs. "Science consists in transporting mystery into explanation[2]." This is deceiving mankind; with revolting pretensions to the positive and a great apparatus of solid appearances, it is teaching people the habit of being satisfied with words. I do believe we have reached the time of which Swedenborg spoke: "Spiritual light has descended from the brain into the mouth, where it appears as the gleam of lips and the sound of speech is taken for Wisdom itself[3]."

At the very least, it seems evident that between the whole of a society thus kneaded with error and souls enamoured of Truth and Beauty, no alliance is possible.

With the Crowd—that treasury of instinctive forces, the Crowd, capable of errors too, easily seduced by whatever glitters (but by what truly glitters!)—the Poet was in natural communion: the union of a soul with its body! The Spirit breathed life at will into docile matter. Far from being merely half-educated, the Crowd embraced her ignorance, and this very embrace placed her in a state of perpetual spiritual receptivity: through the sincere virtue of its unknowing, the Crowd knew everything. This is only seemingly paradoxical: until our modern age, it is the Crowd who writes history and inspires thinkers—the crowd plus one man. All-and-One: here is the authentic and universal author of

those great deeds that live in our memories. The Crowd with Peter the Hermit, the Crowd with Saint Louis—they made the Crusades... The Crowd with Louis XI made France... The Crowd with the Trouvères, the Crowd with Villon—they made the French language.

And here is not the least of those Mysteries that give the mind pause, this double phenomenon, attested throughout the history of linguistics: the omnipotence and fecundity of the Crowd in creating words and their alliances, construction, syntax, the whole genius of Language, whilst the learned[4], attempting the same task, have proved impotent and barren, reduced in all their collaboration on this grand work to merely cataloguing popular inventions. Worse, they have presumed to add their own contrivances, those laborious productions of theirs, rigid with half-digested Greek and Latin learnt by rote, whose unassimilated chunks appear wholesale in the new word (that antique novelty!). That is Greek or Latin; that is not French[5].

The public has inherited none of the great virtues of the Crowd, least of all its verbal fecundity, having lost that spontaneous leap of the soul found in those who remain unspoilt and readily marvel at the world—intuitive beings whose very breath creates the atmosphere essential for the birth of Myths.

Myths are no more, nor Fables. Our readers and spectators ask us to celebrate the time-worn platitudes they have been turning over in their minds since time immemorial. Yet Poets come precisely to speak what has never yet been heard. Our readers and spectators want to recognise themselves in our works, to find their own thoughts reflected there along with a mirror of 'everyday life'. Yet Poets dwell in Dreams where passers-by cannot gain entry without undergoing some form of initiation, brief or lengthy, dreams that stand in direct opposition to *The Daily Grind*. But the passer-by has no time to waste; business calls, and he demands to understand everything immediately. He insists that the Poet's first duty is to 'adopt his point of view', to offer him fare that's quickly and easily digested, nothing that might trouble his mind with overly weighty thoughts. 'After all, what is literature if not a pastime for the educated, an after-dinner diversion?...'

Have you never regarded with a touch of melancholy those *railway bookstalls* which, if we are to believe them, gather together the masterpieces of contemporary literature? The format is convenient, portable; the print large enough not to strain the eyes; the text clear enough not to strain the mind. *Le Roi des montagnes*, for instance, or *Le cas de M. Guérin*—pleasant, 'easy-going' works, not without a dash of irony, just enough to give the style that extra fillip to make it 'flow' even faster. This *railway library* strikes me as deeply telling, perfectly suited to the tastes of an age that considers spiritual needs secondary and, believing it 'saves time'—to what end, alas!—by doing two things at once, now only wants to read whilst 'on the go', and only 'easy-going' things at that. And with both the taste and necessity for travel ever increasing, this *library* has a bright future ahead, since 'literature is the expression of society'.

II

No, such literature is not the modern voice of society; popular opinion is not the true spirit of nations. A literature that refused to pander to the Barbarians would speak only for a society that has all but vanished, save for a vanishing elite who dwell beyond industry's racket, politics' bleating, the vapid applause of smart salons, and all that empty noise our dizzy, crumbling civilisation—whirling down the Maelstrom—has drummed up to dodge the hard work of quiet thought.

Yet the Barbarians' banishment of the Poets drives them towards victory through the esoteric—a formula they can now safely proclaim, for silence itself has died. They are forced to retreat within Art and Genius's God-given borders. This bankruptcy of Art and Genius in the world—what of it? Why should we care? It's fate, and we would waste our breath trying to stop it. Besides, who wants to sit about calculating how long artworks and books might last? The poet doesn't write merely for human memory; if no one understands him, he will survive.

"Then for whom," they ask us, "and why do you write?"

The meadows would flower even without flocks to graze them—it's their nature. Poets write first from this same glorious compulsion to fulfil their nature, to obey the universal law of natural expansion—and to earn their place in Eternity. As emanations of God, sparks flung from the Forge of All-Light, they must return. This is life's universal law: God spills out of Himself through creation, draws Himself back through destruction, spills out again, draws back again, forever and ever. Analysis and Synthesis—the wheeling of blood in our veins and worlds in the Infinite, the wheeling of souls. These are God's outward manifestations, sent forth to play their varied parts in the world's luminous symphony. Follow the divine impulse, and a happy fate brings them home; defy it, and they are hurled from the orbit as darkness swells. When a poet creates, he simply traces his soul's essential arc of light back to God—as does any soul that brings forth the conclusions to which its inner premises point. Besides, as the old truth has it, nothing perishes. No power can unmake what has been, and all that has been lives forever in its ripples through the great cosmic vibration. Poets create to clothe their dreams in eternity. Yet there's a secondary matter: those who wield that tool of all education—the Word, the winged Word—seem called to teach. "Remember," the moralists chide, "those younger brothers hungry for spiritual bread." Their practical upshot? The Poet must stoop to everyone's level, to the masses, the simple folk... What sophistry! Ancient writers could write for *everyone* because *everyone*—thanks to slavery—meant *a handful of leisured elites*. Even then, writers didn't teach; they were concentrated distillations of prevailing tastes and beliefs, secretaries to their readers[6], who never ventured beyond a single city's walls and wouldn't let their writers venture further either—witness Livy accused of Patavinity for not perfectly matching Roman stylistic fashion. But write literature for everyone today? What can that possibly mean? We *print* for all who can, in the *mechanical* sense, decode letters; we cannot write for all in this modern age where spiritual tribes multiply whilst digging ever deeper the moats between them. Neither '89 nor '92 changed this—at best they shuffled the classes about; the divisions remain. We still have aristocrats and peasants, though now they are the dilettanti versus the rest. Never mind that today's aristocrats spring mostly from yesterday's peasantry—they are just as thinly scattered under the new order as the old. Write for the Public! The phrase is nonsense—there is no *Public*. I have used the

singular only as shorthand: there are *publics*, as many as there are human differences in wealth, work, bloodline, schooling, and so on, splitting and splitting again without end. Each microscopic tribe of readers forms its own public with its pet novelist, playwright, gossip columnist and critic, and between these publics flow currents of jealousy and scorn. Octave Feuillet's readers look down their noses—quite rightly—at Alphonse Daudet's; but Daudet's lot can't stop giggling at George Ohnet's following, though I must admit the distinctions escape me. On a hurried day, too rushed to parse fine gradations of craft, I might lump both novelists together. Still, Ohnet's readers preen themselves as aristocrats next to Fortuné du Boisgobey's customers, and if you tell me that lot sneers at Montépin's faithful, I won't be the least bit shocked. Think on it: these classes form distinct nations within the nation, each rabidly patriotic to its own narrow cause, speaking tongues whose family resemblance has long since withered, cherishing ideals mutually unknowable or openly hostile, devoid of shared interests. They cannot even agree on their preferred brand of smut, the *Gil Blas* crowd being worlds apart from the *Vie Parisienne* set. And it's here, in this cacophony of tongues, in this land destined to erect its own burlesque Babel—here, I say, in the dying gasps of nineteenth-century France, that they prate of writing for all! Yet these moralising counsellors have in mind, I suspect, less the whole of our contemporaries than that pitiful rabble who wallow in ignorance unpitied, and who might yet reward the poet with artless devotion and virgin gratitude. Write for the lowly, for simple souls... By all means, try! One may speak to them; one cannot write for them. It becomes mere charity work, all art fled—fit employment for the country parson or the suburban pedagogue, but hardly the Poet's vocation. Here, one celebrated case proves singularly enlightening. Count Tolstoy, sublime creator of *War and Peace*, seized by that evangelical fervour which transforms him into a kind of freelance apostle and spiritual tutor to the moujiks, penned for them in their own idiom that grim tragedy *The Power of Darkness*, showing how remorse strips crime of all reward. The poet, having bent his whole genius to keeping within the most elementary feelings, might reasonably have expected comprehension from his chosen public. How mistaken! The moujiks showed only scorn for a criminal fool enough to turn himself in when he might have savoured his spoils. Perfectly logical, too; for staged morality, that mongrel bred from Fiction and Life, commands the authority of neither—lacking both the Sermon's power to thrust God's burning truth into benighted souls, and the Poem's genuine grace, which rescues the spirit from its sordid daily grind and awakens that salutary yearning for natural liberty.

"Then write for the Select Few, those rare souls fit for elevation, write to raise them up. Each forms a circle's centre; the benign influence spreads from hub to rim... Thus fulfils the writer his educator's duty..."

What snare lies coiled in such accommodation? Let's think: who are these anonymous Few so reverently invoked? Our betters, peers, or inferiors? If peers, no special effort is required—we are already on their plane: a poet writes for equals when he writes for himself. If betters, then we are the supplicants hoping for their manna; or rather, they embody our own Ideal, and our dearest hope is to merit their approval. Most likely, though, they are the third sort: decent minds a cut above the common run, unable to create but able to comprehend—and thus our equals, as Raphael has it: "To understand is to equal." Yet with such minds (and how many exist?), haven't we wandered leagues from those first injunctions: Write for all, write for the humble? We picture well-formed intellects with no need of our instruction; the sole means of "elevating" them is for the Poet to be utterly himself, to soar from his own being as high and far as his strength allows. His only gospel-duty is to make them crane their necks to catch sight of him. This, too, marks the limit of what we may justly demand as his contribution to

humanity's grand enterprise. For if the Poet interprets Beauty—and Beauty signals Truth—his human office is none other than to testify, as magnificently as his powers permit, to our species' dignity. That this dignity remains ideal in poetry doesn't mean it must forever shun practical expression. Base notions breed less readily in readers of Dante, Goethe or Balzac, than in devotees of Dumas or Sardou; *Louis Lambert* plants nobler seeds in the mind than *Les Parents Pauvres*[7].

How could any imagination not guard against its flights—noble or otherwise—whilst still luminous with reflections from a great Thought? And so it is that round palaces and temples, humble dwellings show a certain decency in not affronting their august neighbours.

But the Poets of our day stand accused of a peculiar obscurity, an unnatural penchant for stylistic murk. Might we not ask our critics: are we alone to blame for this supposed delight in formal shadows? Do not these shadows deepen when set against the dreary clarities that line the pockets of Tom, Dick and Harry? Is there not perhaps nobility in this resolve—if resolve it be—to shun the applause of those who celebrate such vile corruptions? And might not the chief fault lie with the times into which these new poets were born?

Such reproaches, in any case, hardly ruffle them. They create with sincerity the work that justifies their existence and, more demanding than any critic, strive first to satisfy themselves. For whom is the work intended? A trifling question. Won't it find those who seek it? Our true friends may well be at the antipodes: the printing press—that diabolic invention which has so ill-served humanity—will bear to them the books we wrote for them in writing for ourselves, and thus redeem some of its sins. And perhaps the grandchildren of those who now read us with distracted, wary eyes will understand us fully. If heredity can resolve our fleeting desires into deeds in our descendants, our evil thoughts into crimes, our virtuous impulses into good works, then from generation to generation it will resolve doubts into certainties and shadows into light.

Poets share something of the patience of that God of light whose genius they partake. Beyond all ephemeral ridicule, they remain humanity's crowning glory. For should some emissary from Venus or Sirius come asking Earth's inhabitants what does them most credit, mankind would soon take stock of their captains, their bankers, their politicians, even their scientists: what value have our bloody triumphs before the stars, our artificial treasures, our quarrels over opinions and borders—and who knows whether the denizens of other worlds haven't achieved deeper scientific truths than ours? Fictions alone, with their daring intuitions, their harmonies, their splendid colours, afford the plenitude and certainty of spiritual joy—and mankind, seeking glory, could present to that distant messenger only their Poets.

III

Yet the dignity of Poets, however incommunicable, remains all too violable. The bitter truth is they need an audience and are forever tempted to court the wavering sympathies that might yet be won. How they would love to pander to the Mob's taste, to win the Barbarians' vote! But no: that way is barred. To curry favour with such masters now means nothing less than betraying one's Destiny. These Publics make for more jealous, more capricious overlords—alas!—than any Duke of Ferrara or Prince of Condé, whilst being decidedly less noble and, needless to say, less generous. What sincere artist can bear being kept by lending-library subscribers or theatre-going crowds? The people, goaded on by success's toadies, have sunk so low in their tastes—I have said it before, but doesn't it bear repeating?—that satisfying them would take a positive genius for the sordid. The signs are unmistakable, the hour has struck. Our fine French tongue has degenerated in contemporary mouths into a jargon stripped of nearly all its native genius; to speak correctly today is practically to speak a dead language—"tedious", they call it. Meanwhile, our literary forms appear spent, moribund even, whilst the neighbouring arts surge forward with something new that encroaches upon Literature itself without quite breaching their own frontiers[8]. And now the Religions—those age-old cornerstones of every Fiction—are crumbling, tottering on their ancient foundations, ready to collapse, and we seem to watch a twilight settling over the world, herald of a night blacker than the Dark Ages, made worse by the complicity of all our futile cleverness, all our experience that has taught us only disillusionment.

Faced with imminent catastrophe, the Poets have done the one thing they could: instinctively recoiled towards Origins. They have broken free from this stifling artificial atmosphere and turned towards Nature—only to be branded "artificial" by a world of artifice. But this is merely one delusion amongst the countless delusions of a society that has everything backwards, that fancies its problem is knowing too much, imagining the masses have absorbed the learning of a few exceptional minds, when in truth the masses have lost all sense of the most basic principles—the primal sense of order, the sense of ultimate purpose.

We have contrived an infinity of essential trivialities to obscure the single reality underlying everything. In all things we put—how perfectly the saying captures it!—the cart before the horse. The cart gets refined; the horses deteriorate. Never have the *means* been so minutely studied as now; the *end* has ceased to matter. The hordes of versifiers who turn out impeccable lines are terrifying—but what goes into them? We have foolproof recipes for concocting novels in the romantic or naturalist manner, yet these eleventh-hour romantics and naturalists don't even seem to grasp that the whole point is to dig out of themselves whatever is most intimate, most singular, most opaque to others and to their own awareness, and forge their novels from that. Instead, their novels plod along exactly like M. de Fontanes's verses at the century's dawn, lumbering down well-worn, flat roads towards foregone, insignificant destinations. Leaving novels without resolution has been the fashion for ages now. Well, it's just another fashion, no better or worse than the rest (rather worse, actually), born of hatred for Imagination and the cult—now outright idolatry—of the "human document". Not that I would have them return to cloaks and daggers; in mediocrity, everything is equally worthless. I am simply observing how craftsmanship has invaded Art—a monstrous development which, whilst hardly new, has this

novel feature today: it no longer even hides itself but proclaims, insists upon, advertises itself as legitimate, *natural*. We now recognise a "profession of man of letters", a calling somewhere between consulting solicitor and dancing-master, not exactly liberal to be sure, and we have quite forgotten what an extraordinary state of being a man must attain before taking that strange step of writing things devoid of the immediate, obvious utility of a business letter or legal plea. But nowhere does this illogic-become-orthodoxy, this madness-turned-proverb, show itself more starkly than in the theatre. Every talent matters to the dramatic work we applaud: the actor's talent first and above all, then the director's talent, the designer's talent, and I daresay the prompter's talent too, every talent save one—the author's, who supplies merely the raw material to be worked up in that collaboration (risible if it weren't so pitiful!) amongst impresario, actor, and lastly author, with success measured doubly by the actor's personal style, his individual flair for gesture and grimace, and by the director's grasp of what he calls "public taste"—the whole thing faithfully, punctiliously, abjectly made to order by that universal lackey, the Poet!

Exceptions exist, I hasten to add, but how rare, and with what suspicion the first-night crowds receive them! *Les Erynnie*[9] flickered briefly on the Odéon's bills before vanishing; *Le Baiser*[10]—does it provoke the noble laughter it deserves? Doesn't it owe its success merely to its punning rhymes, never approaching its true significance? Pure chance—a competition—brought *Le Nouveau Monde*[11] to the stage, where it promptly failed; *Les Corbeaux*[12]—what a nightmare for respectable bourgeois sensibilities! *Formosa*[13] garnered tepid approval at best; *Le Passant*[14] rode on Musset's coattails... No, the authentic dramatic triumphs of our time—ask Monsieur Sarcey!—are *Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie* and *Trois Femmes pour un Mari*. Do I exaggerate?

The fact remains: today's state of taste in this country, the Poet's bondage to publishers who know "what the lending libraries demand," to directors who divine the whims of both boxes and gods, to actors who dictate their roles—this whole arrangement is perverse and imbecilic, lethal to talent's natural growth, the enemy of all sincerity.

And how rich—this public that feeds on theatrical swill daring to call us eccentric because we choose to offend rather than betray the truth that drives us, to cry decadence at us who struggle against all odds to revive the noble traditions they have destroyed. People claim they cannot understand us, and with that insufferable boulevard smugness they dress up this refusal of justice as false modesty: "It's above my head, I'm afraid."

— Quite.

IV

The Absolute remains forever beyond our grasp, alive only in our yearning. But isn't it in the chimerical, in the impossible, that all our humanity's noble reality dwells? Contentment with the finite betrays unmistakable impotence, for such contentment itself spawns the fatigue that saps our strength, each satisfaction another step towards death. Don't we feel it in our very marrow, that death comes to us piecemeal, through a thousand small surrenders? If we could but steel our will towards the Eternal and Immense, towards the infinite and Absolute, death would touch us no more than a shadow touches stone—a trifling accident, powerless against the soul's perpetual life. Here stands Lord Glanvill's truth, that epigraph to Poe's *Ligeia* which floods us like a living truth, with miraculous, divine pride: "And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigour? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."

One scarcely needs metaphysics here—common reflection will do—to grasp that this impossible dream undergirds everything, the *bedrock* beneath all our certainties, instinctive and physical alike. The child lives so wholly in the absolute that, before education's corrupting hand intervenes, it knows nothing of the relative; and the grown man, however grim or comforting his beliefs, schemes and strives as if immortal, feeling in his bones that his truest self persists in his offspring, in works of hand or mind, in echoes of his voice, even in his name chiselled on stone. Thus ancient Egypt consecrated life's every energy to preparing the soul's repose in death, its glory in the tomb that resurrection would fling wide—denying the void even in its seeming victory.

Yet in the pure domain of spirit, our souls' living unity in the Absolute shines forth triumphant—the One and Eternal routing the manifold and fleeting. The moment we rescue our essence from the hamster-wheel of daily cares—forever finishing, forever beginning anew—by devoting ourselves to some abiding pursuit of thought, time itself dissolves. Sleep and waking blur into the single high purpose we have made our reason for being. The book, the artwork, the musical phrase, pure thought itself—I mean even before it takes form—all these eternalise the Self. Through them we shake off contingency's shackles, and the instant it breaks free, the human Self springs back—like a bent sapling loosed to find its natural line—towards the Absolute's hearth, *the metaphysical sphere of Ideas*, to God[15].

Religions, Legends, Traditions, Philosophies—these are the most luminous emanations flowing from the Absolute to us, and the most irrefutable surges of our souls back towards the Absolute—that dream which holds us captive even as it eludes our grasp.

These same Philosophies, Traditions, Religions and Legends are the shared and only wellsprings of Art—that Art which, in the words of Pythagoras and Plato, *sings to the lyre alone*.

I cannot imagine anyone disputing this claim, sanctioned as it is by reason *a priori* and consecrated by history. Still, let us put Reason and History briefly to the question. History will bring us to the conditions of art in our own time—the very subject of this book.

The Beautiful has been debated to exhaustion. Definition upon definition has been ventured. It will serve us well to revisit them here, in the vital inventory assembled by M. de Goncourt:

"... The Beautiful! the splendour of the true... Plato, Plotinus... the quality of the idea revealing itself through symbolic form... a product of the *idealising* faculty... perfection dimly apprehended... the Aristotelian marriage of order and grandeur... What do I know?... The Beautiful—is it the Ideal? Yet the Ideal, traced to its root, εἴδω, *I see*, is nothing but the Beautiful rendered visible... Is it reality rescued from irregularity and accident? Is it the fusion, the concord of existence's twin principles—idea and form, the essence of reality, visible and invisible made one?... Does it dwell in Truth?... But which Truth?... In imitating the beauty of beings, things, bodies? But what manner of imitation?... imitation through selection or through elevation? imitation stripped of particularity, without the iconic stamp of personality—man, not *a* man—imitation after some collective model of perfections? Is it beauty transcending true beauty... '*pulchritudinem quae est supra veram*...' nature glorified anew? What, then, is the Beautiful? objectivity or subjectivity's infinity? Goethe's *expressiveness*? The individual element, the natural, the characteristic championed by Hirsch and Lessing? Man superadded to nature, in Bacon's phrase? Nature filtered through personality, the individuality of sensation?... Or the Platonism of Winckelmann and Saint Augustine?... Is it one or many, absolute or manifold? The supreme expression of the boundless and indefinable? A droplet from God's ocean, according to Leibnitz... for the Ironists, a counter-creation, a human reconstruction of the universe, divine handiwork replaced by something more human, more attuned to the *finite* self—open war on God!... A propaedeutic to morality, Fichte's notion: Beauty as utility! The Dream of the True! The Beautiful! But hold—who can say it even exists? Does it inhabit objects or our minds? The idea of Beauty—perhaps it's nothing but an immediate, unreasoning, personal sentiment. Who can say?…"[16]

The Dream of Truth. One could easily reduce to this formula even the most wayward definitions of Beauty. Every one of them—Fichte's included—imagines a beyond where souls, escaping their dismal uncertainties, bask in clarity, in festive light, in an illumination of the spirit through those senses alive to the delights of line and shade, sound and modulation. Whether confined to this realm of spiritualised senses or, as Fichte would have it, extended to consciousness itself, what is this sensual-spiritual pleasure but Truth radiating through symbols—Truth freed from Abstraction's dry bones and perfected in the raptures of Dream? Dream: that Beyond where the blinding Affirmation withdraws into shadow, sparing our sight whilst gaining in depth and those distant reverberations that lure the spirit ever further into mystery.

By this reckoning, a work achieves art only when it begins where it appears to end—when its symbolism becomes a trembling portal whose harmonious hinges shake the whole soul awake to Mystery. Not merely stirring one faculty of our compound nature, not spirit alone nor senses alone, but revealing through a form so perfect it dissolves itself, leaving in the tremor of Thought only the vague and spellbinding presence—spellbinding and sovereign, sovereign and fertile—of some divine emanation of the Infinite. For in such ideal work, form serves merely as bait for sensual appetite: the senses, charmed and intoxicated, *recognise those primal lines and sounds*, those authentic forms that genius finds in communion with Nature, whilst the spirit roams free. Art thus conceived does more than unveil the Infinite—it becomes the Poet's passage into it. Plunging deeper than any Philosophy, prolonging the revelations of Gospel, it is light calling to light, as one flame kindles a thousand in the sleeping vaults of a crystal cavern. Art knows what the artist knows not[tn2].

Art is religious by nature, by its very essence. It springs to life in the shadow of Revelations, breathing life into them through intimate union, and proclaiming their death when it breaks free. Cast out on its own, it wanders through dark regions where it often burns brighter—harbinger of a new Revelation—than it ever did shackled to those temporary errors that corrupt the eternal truths of a dying faith.

This is the iron law of artistic evolution. Crack open History anywhere—no need to dig deep—and everywhere you will find Religions spawning Arts: the one drawing from the other the graces of worship, whilst Art blooms around Religion like proof of life itself. Judaea possessed Poetry and architecture solely through the Bible and Solomon's Temple. Egypt's death-obsessed religion produced architecture and sculpture only through its tombs—those temples to Isis in all but name—its Pyramids, Sphinxes, and bas-reliefs where Humanity appears condemned to endless repetition: a single type with hieratic features and ritual gestures, prostrate before divine Death. To justify the colossal splendours of their civic architecture, the Egyptians fused godhead with kingship—their palaces were simply temples by another name. Their literature? Wholly sacerdotal. The same principle operates, with local variations, in Persia, Assyria, amongst Hindus and Chinese. Greek Polytheism and Art—poetry, architecture, sculpture—were indivisible. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are professions of faith, though perhaps a faith already nodding off. It springs awake and blazes forth in Aeschylus with the terrible flash of thunderbolts striking the Christ-Prometheus. It turns irritable in Aristophanes. Finds its equilibrium in Sophocles. Loses itself in Euripides, that poet of the recurring hour in humanity's great cycles, when, having shed its first fervours, tumbled from the sweeping enthusiasms of its dawn, alienated from ancient symbols left to gather dust, half-paralysed yet sharpened by doubt, stripped of self-mastery and the old confidence in its powers of comprehension, humanity learns to live by the heart, throwing itself into passionate dramas where it readily discovers a parallel synthesis—humbler but more piercing, infinitely more wrenching—of those spiritual dramas now perhaps exhausted, perhaps forgotten. Greek faith would blaze up one last time in sunset glory with the Alexandrian philosophers and poets, though with more yearning than certainty, more regret than hope. Imagination has sold itself short through emotional habit; the Great Greek Imagination has squandered its miraculous fertility, luxuriating instead in exquisite subtleties and precious refinements—but the sacred shiver is gone. Here is enlightened decadence, a second childhood conscious of childhood's charms, its prophetic innocence, its knack for making its beliefs come true. Yet this second childhood remains senile, barren, and art would desert it—lucky, then, that ancient civilisation, propped up by artifice, stands ready to crumble. Rome tells the same story, though Art and Religion embrace there with less sincerity than in Greece—doubtless because the race, lacking native roots, subsists on traditions handed down by rote rather than discovered through revelation.

The same holds entirely true at the dawn of modern civilisation. All art in the Middle Ages is Christian through and through—from the Primitives' frescoes to cathedral spires, from Dante to Palestrina. The Renaissance corrupts this marriage of Religion and Art, threatens to tear them asunder—which is to say that Christianity itself falls into corruption, grows anaemic, hovers at death's door, and needs nothing less than the Reformation's cruel bloodletting to regain a pulse. Yet even this restored life is a life at war, and besides, the hours of sweet Christian beauty have been all too brief. The Middle Ages—"enormous and delicate"[17]—that blue-black vista receding through the centuries, appears to us as a tragic wasteland broken by oases: chivalrous and poetic during the Crusades, yet hideous under the reign of so many craven bandits calling themselves Kings; all fire and blood during

the Inquisition. A long night, in sum, shot through with radiant meteors, extravagant in darkness and light alike: heroes are few, but they hold whole peoples in their grip; ideas are scarce, but countless multitudes acclaim and enact them; teachers of doctrine are rare, yet disciples abound… — Come the seventeenth century in France[18], Catholicism and Protestantism—grafts on the great Christian trunk—both draw what little life remains to them from that first, far-off surge of sap. Rivalry keeps the two sects ornamentally alive: their mutual loathing preserves in each a jealous clutch on its own peculiar share of truth. Catholicism above all, as the more literal heir to Christian rites, steels itself against further encroachment by that spirit of innovation which Protestantism has supposedly embraced as its guiding principle—that "free examination," a compass that finds north in every direction! The Catholic sect calcifies in its worship of the past, yet from this very renunciation of youth draws something like a supernatural vigour, a second wind, near-claims upon the future, or at least undisputed dominion over the present. With startling nimbleness, it contrives to prop itself upon two forces one might have thought most proof against its influence—forces Christianity has always either mastered (in one case) or fought (in the other): Royalty and the Renaissance. Art, the vital sign of its life, was slipping away: through concessions, it holds on. Temporal Power alone can furnish the defensive strength it lacks. The Church becomes that Power's very justification, mining from Holy Scripture a ruthless Politics whilst keeping the lion's share for itself. And built upon this balance—rickety perhaps, contrary to nature, and doomed to fail—there came nonetheless a magnificent moment: the moment of its supremacy. Here we must always return to discover the sure principles of pure French prose—certainly diminished since Rabelais, but all the firmer for it. This is the language I admire in *Le Discours de la Méthode* and the *Méditations*, in the *Oraisons funèbres* and *Sermons*, in *Télémaque*, the *Caractères*, the *Fables*, the Tragedies and Comedies, and above all in the *Pensées*—but equally in the minor writings of that truly admirable age, admirable for what it achieved, however bitterly we may reflect on what it failed to achieve. Catholicism, having weathered that awkward business of seizing Authority—by what machinations!—appeared to swell with pride in the life-giving powers of Truth. Channelling the Renaissance torrent into the Christian stream, it created in literature a magnificent double current, unified despite its duality, ardently mystical even in its pagan reveries. (The other arts, admittedly, dozed—except among Protestant peoples, where the hot blood of the Reformation prolonged, though perhaps debasing, their artistic vitality.) The goal was nothing less than to win for Catholic genius the universal empire of minds—and for this task, that genius summoned forth admirable powers. While sacred orators sang Christian legends, drew out every last consequence from dogmatic premises, and extracted from the most rarefied theological speculation a complete Christian psychology, morality and politics, the poets cast the light of the Cross backwards through time to illuminate pagan ages. Christian spirit gazed at its own reflection in ancient mists and quickened them to life. Thus we witnessed old Corneille resurrect Rome's heroes, whilst through Racine's enchantment, the stately peoples of Sophocles and Euripides rose from the dust. Yet only the costume and storyline remained antique: the souls were converts, newly baptised. No historical reconstruction this—rather beautiful chimeras, what André Chénier would later desire, "ancient verses on modern thoughts", homelands of the imagination. Augustus, a Christian; Andromache, a catechumen; Phaedra, a penitent... And surely Corneille and Racine erected *Athalie* and *Polyeucte*[19]—like twin columns of a triumphal arch through which the whole century processes—precisely to embody this deeper meaning of their work? The double achievement was complete: poets had reclaimed the great pagan fables to dedicate them to Christ—just as the Popes had done in Rome, transforming temples into basilicas, whilst doctors of the triumphant Religion had reformed all public and private life by the boundless expansion of a single, inexhaustible principle. —

Yet barely was the work finished than its brevity became apparent. It was scarcely human, being so austere, so tightly bounded. The spirit chafed—perhaps without quite grasping why—at the banishment of harmony and colour for their own sake, apart from or beyond the purely intellectual sense of words. It took its revenge for this tyranny of precise meaning by over-refining it into the Italian *concetti* and Spanish gongorisms of a Saint-Amand or a Théophile. This ready-made answer to everything that an unchanging religion provided cut brutally short the Poets' burning quest for a Faith more soothing and satisfying, perhaps loftier, certainly broader and more tender than this fortress-Catholicism, closer too to the Absolute. It stifled those intuitions, those hopes, those flights of spirit, all those dreams which, though never lost to Truth in the end, are always Beauty's gain and form the truest homeland of genius—a homeland that a younger Creed, confident of longer life, would have kept hovering about itself rather than pronouncing anathema upon it. Granted, the official Creed as it stood protected and supported literature, maintaining it in an atmosphere of nobility—rather official itself, but not without grandeur. Yet this guarantee of unity, which morally obliged everyone to base all efforts on the religious cornerstone, entailed an anxiously narrow care not to transgress Dogma's conclusions, or at least counselled staying in those middling regions where independence runs least risk: in Corneille's robust heroism, Racine's psychology of passion, Molière's everyday moral rigour, La Bruyère's minute and sparkling observation, La Fontaine's sly worldly wisdom. Even in these temperate zones one might provoke the wrath of unbending Theology—remember how Bossuet speaks of Molière! And at this zenith of triumph, wasn't Theology right to proscribe the Theatre? (If it went too far—well, that's triumph's splendid failing!) Wasn't it bound to eye the stage jealously, as a rival temple, a blasphemous parody of sacred spectacle and ritual, the seed of some future religion, a worldly cult, a revival of Paganism—a wholly carnal worship of beautiful forms made doubly dangerous by Art and Passion's devilish glamour, a collective prostitution glorified? Catholicism could only view with mistrust this glorification of human feelings, being itself the superhumanly austere glorification of the soul purged of passions. But apotheoses endure only for reason's brief moment. This iron discipline already sensed and foretold its own decay: we guard so jealously only what we fear to lose. Bossuet's sublime but merciless vigilance—he who was Catholicism's Aeschylus—finds its explanation in Fénelon's accommodations, where conscience seems to unbend, almost to go soft, losing its sense of upright bearing for fear of forgetting livelier grace, the sweetness of letting go, the charm of leniency. Yet this vigilance could destroy neither the cause nor the effect of such accommodations: reaction is a law against which genius itself is powerless. The world had grown weary of its enforced solemnity—and so it would laugh for an entire century, explode in feverish mirth, pausing only to sneer in the seventeenth century's wake, to sneer and sometimes heavily philosophise throughout that age of Voltaire and d'Alembert, of Parny and Volney, of the *Lettres Persanes* and *L'Esprit des Lois*—that eighteenth century, first a stagnant pool, then a raging torrent, melting-pot of the seventeenth's ruined grandeurs.

There it drooped in melancholy alongside his aged king—that caricature of majesty, more symbol than man, more convention than flesh, drawing what lustre he possessed from time-worn traditions. His only virtue lay in accepting his peculiar fortune: to be a shadow ringed by brilliance. How ironically his title of Sun King echoes through history! Symbol indeed, this Most Christian, Most Catholic monarch who plucked his final passion from the very Huguenots he had hounded from the realm. Thus did Catholic excess meet Protestant austerity halfway—for Protestant she [Madame de Maintenon] remained, Scarron's widow, whatever her professed conversion. Protestant in deportment and manner, Protestant in thought and spirit, Protestant to the marrow. What perverse providence that this grim attendant to a dying century should bear the name of France's most ribald versifier! All that

was basest in the age of Louis XIV finds its flowering in the scheming personage, the hushed dominion, the frigid scribblings of Madame de Maintenon. Through her, it seems, a cause already rotten sealed its own defeat. In her, a century's vast enterprise of pure reason dwindled to the pettiest calculations, to paltry pedagogical nostrums—a tepid trickle seeking to stem tomorrow's tide, even as that mighty current, once flowing free in generous torrents but now grown weary of scouring barren shingle, prepared to fester in its own depths before bursting, at the storm's appointed hour, through banks made narrow by neglect, swollen drop by drop with each generation's toll. — By the dawn of the eighteenth century, Catholic Christianity had spent its force. The medieval legends awaited their faithful. Those intriguing Cartesian fallacies had already become mere historical curiosities. What remained? Condillac and Laplace lived and wrote alongside Voltaire, yet chronology can deceive: their hour had not struck. The day belonged to Voltaire—which is to say, to vacancy itself.

They speak of "the age of Voltaire", just as he spoke of "the age of Louis XIV". Very well. Perhaps both epochs truly deserve to be summed up in these two names—and if Louis XIV strikes us as carved from wood, Voltaire is moulded from mud. Thank God it's old hat to call that celebrated champion of wit an imbecile[20]. But to take his work as the voice of his century—there's a bitter irony, all the more savage for being so justified. This colossal œuvre amounts to nothing. Add it to humanity's achievements or strike it from the record—the sum remains unchanged, not by a jot. Nothing in poetry, nothing in prose, nothing in science. On the credit side, Voltaire leaves us precisely nothing. On the debit side, he has his revenge: the blast of emptiness he unleashed has blighted everything in its path. An epidemic of nothingness! Not a scrap of literature for an entire century!—save for a few sharp wits towards the close: but can we honestly call Diderot's scribbling on every subject under the sun literature? Or Chamfort's barbs? Or the table-talk of Rivarol and the Prince de Ligne? Breaking free from religious belief failed to unlock that harmony and colour the previous century's poets had pined for when they gazed back wistfully at the troubadours' innocence—that freedom a Racine or La Fontaine would sometimes snatch for themselves. The eighteenth century positively relished its own sterility, withering imagination through sheer coldness of heart. Even Beaumarchais, even Marivaux, even the Abbé Prévost—for all their protestations of feeling—had too much of that cleverness that kills poetry, and too little freedom. Led by Voltaire, every would-be poet of the age grovelled in the dust before the dictates of the prosody police and rhetoric brigade. Even when Shakespeare burst upon him, Voltaire remained stone-blind!

As for the celebrated prose writers in his circle, they all played at literature without producing any: natural history (Buffon), legal philosophy (Montesquieu), absolutely everything (Diderot). One man alone breaks the mould, but Rousseau belongs no more to the eighteenth century than Chateaubriand does: Rousseau, Goethe and Chateaubriand herald the nineteenth. Music? A blank.[21] Painting flounders in an unsettling, enchanting half-light—more dusk than dawn. Modern Imagination destroyed itself by trying to stay earthbound, to do without God. This time, to breathe life back into Imagination, fate would need weapons other than fresh Revelation. It would guide minds back to religious feeling, through sheer exhaustion with a mirth that had whipped itself into numbness. (This in the age that threw around the word "sensitive" like confetti, even unto sadism.) Rousseau's tearful outpourings would give his contemporaries back their very Christian taste for weeping through awe at scientific breakthroughs, as Newton and Laplace would startle minds into relishing the grandest speculations, into taking themselves seriously again (if only because it was fashionable), into debating gravitational theory between courses at their little suppers; through the cataclysm of Revolution and

Terror, which would restore both the appetite for heroism and the sense of life's fragility to these hearts grown tender again, these minds grown earnest again. Then could flourish, alongside Condillac and Goethe, the great theosophical school of de Maistre and de Bonald, and the great literary school of Chateaubriand. Twin currents drawing minds towards religion (Christian in spirit more than Catholic in doctrine) and towards Beauty would light up the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Yet this stirring of minds, sincere though it may be, cannot erase the deep scars left by a whole century of denial and emptiness. The world has been sceptical too long to shake off the habit. This return to Christianity has something staged about it, rather like Napoleon's charade of piety when he threw open the churches and took the imperial crown from papal hands. Here, will comes before faith —perhaps even replaces it. The dawn of the nineteenth century stands alone in humanity's great chronicle. For the first time, Art breathes life into religions rather than drawing life from them. The medieval legends that France had left for foreign poets to mine for masterpieces spring back to life. At first, they are rough sketches—who cares about accuracy, so long as the overall effect rings true enough and strikes a pleasing note? But standards will rise. Chateaubriand's historical whimsy is worlds away from Hugo's; and Hugo's from Flaubert's, more distant still. We are living in the past now, utterly steeped in it, and Auguste Comte's chilling truth holds sway: "The living are increasingly ruled by the dead." These poet-litterateurs who fashioned Romanticism lead such artificial lives that their convictions never leave the page for the real world. Pen in hand, they turn Christian, pagan, even Mohammedan at will. They collect religions like curios, and so this grotesque possibility emerges: one can now speak of Religion without giving Truth a second thought! I feel no longing for that delightful *Jeunes-France* moment. To my mind, they are all rather too much like human shells stripped of heart and soul, striking grand attitudes in flowing robes, gestures empty of genuine feeling. Truth be told, they care about everything except what matters. On the subject of human destiny, they offer only the haziest elegiac mutterings, still reeking of the vapid century that spawned them. Even Lamartine, their finest, cannot quite forget his readings of Dorat and Parny, and won't hesitate to lift half a line from Thomas! What makes their theatrical posturing all the more pointless is that these poets' impersonal minds house only the vaguest generalities; they sport a moth-eaten philosophical costume that's threadbare yet somehow holds together, and instead of yielding entirely to the newly spruced-up religious garb, they strike a bargain—half of one, half of the other. The minds of that era truly wore motley! Not that this troubles them. They revel in their stage properties. The brooding look, the doom-laden glance—all the rage. They have perfected the art of cold-blooded passion. The abnormal has become the norm, and arch-villains—really just arch-cowards—pass for heroes worthy of love and acclaim. But again, it's all in the head; nobody actually follows suit, and your typical Romantic, in his real or sham domestic arrangements, remains a law-abiding citizen perfectly at ease with the civil code. Still, they all strike those grandiose poses—Spanish, Italian, theatrically choreographed. Their historical models come with certified dates, documented mannerisms, authentic costumes: so they dress the part, speak the language, write in period style. The living souls of this fantastical hour sport profiles straight from medallions—or rather, carefully arranged to match them—aping historical figures so perfectly they fool even themselves. Indeed, this century seems to have lived, in its first half, a purely historical existence. And look—could this be the key?—it's the century of historians, of Thierry and Michelet. There lies both its glory and its failing. This fascination with the past is splendid, but what's built on the rubble of dead ages remains a splendid corpse unless a vibrant faith in what's to come transforms it into a beacon for the dark road ahead. Can life's compass point only backward? This obsession with yesterday betrays a failure to shoulder today or shape tomorrow.

The historical sense is—inevitably, by its very nature, since we only have history when we have lived long enough—the hallmark of an ageing race, a badge of decline. It stirs to life with the critical faculty, at that crucial moment in a society's life when spontaneous creativity must be bridled. Soon enough, we are judging everything through history's lens, even the day's events, which we document obsessively whilst feeling no immediate stake in them: they are too new! They want for time's distance, for the patina of ages. All the better for our grandchildren: they will wrangle passionately over accidents we note with a shrug, just as we pontificate over the affairs of a century past. And so the generations roll on, careless of where they are headed, forever glancing backwards like routed armies who fear the pursuer more than they seek the unknown sanctuary ahead. Yet here's the rub: we love our pursuer—history's deathless multitude of the dead. But what treacherous affection! This endless brooding over our forebears' works leaves us no time to build anything ourselves: we will hand down little more than fodder for our descendants' dissertations. Besides, this unseemly rush to enter history—which is to say, death—sounds the death knell of civilisations. Certainly, it was through history, at this century's dawn, that Religion and Art—once indivisible in the heyday of Latin culture—came unstuck. And just as certainly, the Romantic age, for all its signal services to Art, remains—having dithered childishly between sham religion, reactionary philosophy, and sheer indifference—an age when Thought slumbered in its cradle.

Even writers acclaimed as the most devout Christians never quite capture the *living* pulse of the faith they hymn. With de Bonald, despite his patent sincerity, there's something dead—or at least moribund—in that frigid tone, that soporific prose. Joseph de Maistre cuts a different figure entirely, that towering poet. His style throbs with life, all fire—though fire more than light, burning rather than illuminating. His ideas outrun their Christian moorings and surge back towards Old Testament severity, channelling Tertullian's harsh, grace-less tragedy, envisioning a Christianity more Pauline than Johannine, armed with rhetoric that takes no prisoners. His world, propped on the executioner's scaffold, is not Christ's world. With Chateaubriand, real mysticism notwithstanding, we have arrived at the age of Christian aestheticism. This is religiosity, not religion; literature, not faith. The genius of Christianity, he calls it. His words say so, but not his heart: he would wax just as lyrical about the genius of paganism. He's hunting for purple passages, for arias. How readily he soars—and how splendidly!—into raptures where Revelation has no place, where Nature alone commands worship. And *René* is meant to be an episode in *Le Génie du Christianisme*! Mark the Poet's technique, it betrays his mind. He treats Eudore and Cymodocée as Fénelon does Telemachus and Calypso, with that detached admiration no true believer would feel. It's not merely the gap in genius but the gulf in feeling that makes reading Chateaubriand after Dante like stepping from high summer into winter's depths. For Dante believes, and the *Divine Comedy* is a work of faith militant, where nothing serves mere ornament, where form clings to substance like armour to the body; in *Le Génie du Christianisme* and *Les Martyrs*, it billows like court dress. Scattered through Lamartine's *Harmonies*, our most lyrical poet's fervour may deceive us momentarily; but peer closer, and here too we find a nebulous mysticism that slops over Christianity's edges into thoroughly pagan sensuality, where eros matters more than faith. The *Méditations* and *Harmonies* aren't so much hymns to a living creed as its gorgeous threnody. Like Chateaubriand, Lamartine slips into the past tense whenever religion requires precision; what remains present and vital in both is simply humanity's perennial passion. To sum up: what they all lack, these philosophers and poets, is what believers call *the sense of Christ's real presence*. The Gospel's beauty moves them more than its truth, and their successors will chase Beauty elsewhere, proclaiming—some in sorrow, some with a shrug—that Truth doesn't exist.

Before launching this sketchy yet overlong survey of how Religion and Art have danced together, I claimed that Religion—enriched by Legend, Tradition, and Philosophy—is Art's wellspring, that Art is religious at its core. Yet having watched an attempt at reconciliation—perhaps honest, certainly brief—between Religion and Art, we now see them splitting in what looks like a final separation. What are we to make of this?

Is the eighteenth century upon us again? Are we sliding back into that hideous, hateful age—incapable of gravity, able only to pedantically preach doctrines of death whilst hiccupping through its infamous laughter? That age which drove out the very feeling of veneration—the only fruitful sentiment—from humanity's most legitimate objects of reverence; which left the divine idea to moulder in the sacred ark where Descartes had so rashly confined it; and which, after a century's gestation, brought forth two offspring: one laughable—the Encyclopaedia; the other terrible—the Revolution? No —everything tells against it. The men of our time, even those who consummate the divorce I speak of, bear none of the marks that damn the eighteenth century's men to our contempt. These are noble thinkers, genuine scholars. If the idea of God strikes them dumb, at least it draws neither laughter nor blasphemy. They tremble at the things they discuss. They even cherish Unity—that divine hallmark—and openly rejoice to see the sciences converging once more into Science under their eager hands, returning to that primal unity which bore fruit. How utterly different the eighteenth century's spirit of division—its only spirit!—with its compulsion to shrink everything to its own paltry scale. Our contemporaries see broadly. They hold man in enlightened regard, yet don't make him the measure of all things. They know much and wear it lightly. Pascal said: "I can only approve those who seek in anguish." Our scholars and thinkers seek, and are at least grave. Their sincerity thrums through their work, and if we must respect those who show respect, then we cannot toss off lightly the names of the nineteenth century's luminaries, though they are, alas! far from singing in unison: Edgar Poe, Carlyle, Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Auguste Comte, Claude Bernard, Berthelot…

But why—how—do we not find these geniuses gathered round the altar of a Revelation proclaimed as the wellspring of all truth? How did they drift from it, or why did it cast them off? And why—how—in the dubious, anguished silence of truth's appointed guardians, does the word that cuts through the world's darkness come only from these poets, philosophers and scientists? What has made the genius of art and the genius of science abandon the Gospel?

The answer forces itself upon us—terrible—and I give it trembling. I tell myself again: *Art, bound intimately to Revelations, manifests their life and, by leaving them, attests their death. Then it strikes out alone into dark regions where it often shines more brightly—herald of some new Revelation—than when it was shackled to those temporary errors that corrupt the eternal truths of decrepit Revelations.* Not that Art proves ungrateful to the venerable Nurse whose milk and care gave it strength. But Art is young and she is old; she drivels and dodders whilst Art speaks.

I certainly lack the audacity to forecast what will be. In today's confused tangle of regrets and longings that vex both mind and heart, only one affirmation remains possible, and it's vague: we live in transitional times. "We pass from mystery to mystery," as Carlyle says, and the brightest gleam of hope on thought's horizon is that pure science has regained its rightful precedence over history—which hovers uncertainly between science and literature.

Humanity has discovered in its scientific achievements tangible reasons for self-congratulation. If this pride smacks of childishness, if it tends to lapse into vanity, perhaps we must accept this as the

inevitable sediment lurking at the bottom of every human vessel. Or perhaps humanity's breakneck plunge into the unknown, its compulsion to push ever faster, ever further, has warped and corrupted its powers of thought. In that case, by what only seems a paradox to the casual observer, this mad humanity finds its saving grace in its poets—in their inspired pilgrimage back to the wellsprings of all truth, to those primordial faiths that spawned religions now themselves extinct, to the inexhaustible source of ancient mysteries, to that enigmatic procession of the Three Kings who journeyed from the vast reaches of Asia, bearing myrrh, gold and frankincense, to bestow divinity upon a child in a manger.

Here lies the defining hallmark of the new Literature: this burning desire to marry Truth with Beauty, this longed-for wedding of Faith and Joy, of Science and Art. The eighteenth century pronounced such a union impossible. The seventeenth century forced it through sheer will, pressing Art into servitude when it can breathe only in freedom. Romanticism tried to fake it through sleight of hand, with a recklessness—criminal if it weren't so naive—towards thought itself, which it scattered about like loose change when thought's true place is at the very heart of things. Naturalism sought to shrink this union down to the paltry dimensions of brute matter, which it took to be the sole province of both Art and Thought. But we—we dream of achieving this magnificent union in all its splendour, boldly and expansively, by placing Thought, Science, Faith and Truth at the centre, from which radiant core the manifestations of Integral Art shall stream forth like life-giving rays to the glorious periphery.

Yet our thirst for the absolute finds no satisfaction at Christianity's wells. Are we mistaken, or have they indeed run dry?

They appear parched to us, though it would be both rash and unfair to pronounce them permanently so. Christianity harbours within itself astonishing powers of renewal: perhaps the Evangelist merely sleeps and shall soon awaken.

That great Catholic writer Ernest Hello, blessed with uncanny prophetic insight, seemed to glimpse in a future now almost upon us the dawn of a new evangelical triumph. He writes:

"Between the eighteenth century and what I call the twentieth—should it begin tomorrow—earth's clock strikes a slow and terrible hour, the hour of transition: this is our terrible nineteenth century. Half-awake, still groggy from its nightmares, it neither possesses nor grasps; but it yearns, it yearns, it yearns, O Lord, as the world has never yearned before..."

How true! This yearning is both its curse and its crown. But why can't it find what it craves in the Church that once nursed its ancestors? Why, when this century—as hungry for Beauty as it is parched for Truth—turns in its distress to that Church where its forebears found illumination and life, does it meet only petty rules and rigid conventions, stripped of those living graces that once brought whole nations to their knees before the priest's outstretched arms? Why have the cathedral naves grown so cold? Why has the great ship's captain abandoned his helm, retreating to that shabby halfway house that's neither Temple nor dwelling—that *sacristy* where Religion seems to thrive more than at altar or pulpit, but with a degraded, musty vitality, reduced to minding tawdry earthly treasures hawked for coin? What has become of Catholicism's inner fire—and I won't even mention Protestantism, that pale imitation of civic religion that leaves both heart and mind unsatisfied—what has become of its essential virtue, that for two centuries now it has failed to show us genius and Sanctity joined in blessed union? All well and good that the Curé d'Ars and Benedict Labre have been canonised; we can "chalk this up" to the sheer momentum of Christianity's superhuman architecture—the heart is always last to

fail. But only genius creates and perpetuates: where is our St Anselm? Our St Thomas Aquinas? How can the seventeenth century's greatest theologians be merely great theologians and not saints? How is it that this century's most celebrated Catholic names conjure up only the worldly memory of eloquent barristers who, when all was said and done, possessed neither true learning nor simplicity and amounted to little more than sincere speechmakers?

And from another, equally troubling angle: why does the Church tolerate, why does it foster that obscene travesty of religious art, that blend of vulgarity and witlessness? Why are the glorious medieval basilicas defiled by bleeding hearts that belong on butchers' signs and madonnas that could double as hairdressers' window dummies? Why does the organ itself—born of a mystical union between genius and holiness—stoop to blaring theatrical tunes and operatic melodies between psalms caterwauled by the cracked voices of sullen, depraved choir boys, while at the altar unfolds the Mystery that strikes terror and love into the hearts of angels?

Why is Catholic literature so utterly worthless—worse than worthless, positively nauseating even to the most forgiving critic? Why does the Catholic establishment rebuff any genuine talent that tries to rekindle the inspiration which once made the Church the natural home of artists—loudly in the case of M. Barbey d'Aurevilly, with deafening silence for M. Paul Verlaine? Is this truly the same Church that sheltered literature and all the arts and philosophies in its medieval sanctuary? One is tempted to reply: "No, this is no longer that Church. This is merely the funeral spectre of what once lived in joyous glory. And here's the deeper truth behind both that life and this death. Revelations depend on human genius to interpret them, and survive only as long as they provide the atmosphere genius needs to live and flourish. Now genius, being God's shadow, *shares* His creative nature. Within any Revelation, its creative scope is necessarily limited to establishing logical structures and *codifying* doctrine. Christian genius therefore thrived magnificently—what a splendid life that illuminates all history!—whilst dogmas still needed it for their proclamation and *definition*, whilst it still had the noble work of forging, in the Creed, the marriage of Divine and human Reason, whilst it still bore that sublime commission: *revealing* to humanity what new light the Revelation brought. Once that work was done and that commission discharged, Genius and Revelation became incompatible. Perhaps Revelation already survives beyond its time, having no fresh word for the world. At the very least, it no longer needs genius, which has become a dangerous ally—forever in love with novelty, forever burning to create. Defending established truths simply isn't enough for genius. The most touching proof of genius's inability to accept this lesser role lies close at hand. Lamennais's sincerity is beyond doubt, and when he branded with fire, in the first volume of *De l'indifférence en matière de religion*, the great evil and fault of his age, he hit the mark. But as the pages mounted, genius began to strain against its shackles, grew restless with this ban on creation that had become Dogma's first commandment to its priests, and almost innocently, through sheer natural momentum, Lamennais tumbled into heresy. Since then, anyone who has made their mark in the Church has attracted suspicion. 'Perhaps Christianity lies entombed in Saint Thomas's *Summa*.' That's what one wants to say. This answer may be wrong. As I have said, we may yet see the great Sleeper rise from what looks like the sleep of death. Then we will believe, and how joyfully we will cry hosanna! But for now, our very honesty—this needed saying—alienates us from a Credo that strikes us as merely its own ghost, and we think we honour its original spirit by going beyond it. Used to seeing Beauty shine through every *living* Religion, recognising Beauty as both Truth's guardian and herald, we ask Beauty alone—since the Religions have cast her out—what Truth she *should* illuminate. As poets and thinkers, we listen to the mysterious winds rising from the depths of phenomena, and we

seek light and life wherever they may be found, even in history's dark corners, if they hold more life and light than this present twilight that seems to marshal the dance of death.

We seek Truth through Beauty's harmonious laws, drawing from her all metaphysics—for the harmony of hues and sounds mirrors the harmony of souls and worlds—and all morality too; after all, our very word "honesty" springs from "honestus," meaning "beautiful." Though the certainties of Religion have failed us—we remain grateful nonetheless for that noble piety which cradled and purified our childhood—we now press hard upon the traces of ancient Traditions, reaching back to before History's birth, to those mysterious Legends that nomadic peoples, exiles all, carry through our anxious modern world that hears but cannot comprehend them. We gather up the teachings of great Thinkers, Magi and Metaphysicians, those heroes of the human spirit; we shall venture further still along the paths they blazed; we shall study too at the altar of ancient Cults, mining from each its hidden grain of eternal gold. And when faith's joy sets our souls ablaze with enthusiasm, we shall celebrate this mystical rapture through Art's Sacrifices and Festivals. For some, this joy springs from genius's intuition when confronting Nature: they let sing through their work the sumptuous simplicity of eternal forms and feelings, of line and countenance. Others require the full arsenal of human knowledge—those nimble hands that seize Truth in its hiding places—and these, as devoted servants of the Gospel of Correspondences and the Law of Analogy, offer up vast syntheses, rendering melodious and luminous those Mysteries glorified in Fiction's Reality, each according to their intellectual strength and sincerity of heart. Yet for all alike, Art has ceased to be that trivial entertainment which past generations merely tolerated and which those to come would still demand. All consider themselves ordained to an unshakeable priesthood: they are the high celebrants of Truth's sacred rites and righteous Joy. This joy —though it may occasionally smile upon wit and brilliant mirth—remains grave at heart: its sole path leads to the Absolute, its sole sustenance is Eternity. With austere discrimination it selects its lineage from the past; with proud defiance it beckons the future; towards the present it harbours deep disdain, seeking rarified air to breathe. How it shudders before our modern temples of Art, those theatres consecrated to Integral Art's supreme flowering yet so wretchedly unworthy of the honour! How it suffers at books trapped in ephemeral concerns—it who beneath all fleeting surfaces seeks, as the magnet seeks iron, the unchanging core; it whose most fervent sincerity echoes that human cry resounding from sacred heights: "*Irrequietum cor meum, Domine, donec requiescat in Te*!" ["Restless is my heart, O Lord, until it finds its rest in Thee!"]

Note

A casual reader of the foregoing pages—whether careless or malicious—might fancy I'm announcing an age of *biblical bombast* in literature's immediate future: a *formal reversion* to prophetic inspiration and diction, coupled with an absurd contempt for our predecessors and the Works that taught us our craft, all in the service of an exclusive fixation on the idea of God. And this idea, remaining fuzzy in the woolly minds I suspect prone to such misapprehension, evokes nothing so much as the tedium of windy lyricism.

Both the careless and the malicious can be safely ignored. Still, one wants to bar the door against such nonsense.

What I have actually argued in these pages is, first and principally, that Art reaches its original and ultimate flowering in the atmosphere of the Absolute—hence through Religion in its beginnings, Metaphysics in its culmination—and second, that today's public leaves artists with a stark choice: prostitution or exile. The old saying runs: "He who rises above isolates himself"—grim enough already. But our shabby contemporary truth is that merely refusing to stoop is enough to ensure solitude.

None of this precludes the resources of observation—whether Stendhal's psychological variety, M. Zola's physiological approach, or M. de Goncourt's fusion of both in what might be called a modernist mode. I name these three advisedly, for though they command varying degrees of esteem, they surely embody what's most distinctive in our literary moment. Yet anyone with eyes to see will readily distinguish between what in their works panders magnificently to *public* taste (that taste which finds "refined" expression in Messieurs Daudet and Loti, "vulgar" in M. Ohnet) and what betrays their failure to meet the full measure of our age's demands. What an hour this is! The world's end or a world's beginning? Such questions needn't be universal to be significant—it's enough that our finest and most honest minds are seized by them. Clearly, they burn to bear witness to their Humanity, seeing in Art a sacred instrument—not to be debased—for testifying to their race and themselves. Perhaps they mean to leave a younger generation the concentrated legacy of centuries of spiritual wealth; perhaps to answer, when the question drops from heaven: "*Digni sumus"* [tn3]

This noble, urgent ambition doesn't breed contempt for the past—quite the reverse. It demands respect, but respect with eyes open, free from slavish devotion to history's sterile critical viewpoint. A *living* respect that seeks in the past not dead monuments but lessons that light the way forward, helping today's intuitions crystallise into fertile new syntheses.

We honour established forms precisely insofar as they bear within them the seeds of forms to come.

Let us then read the future in the present, the present in the past—new formulas in the womb of the old.

The Accomplished Formulae

Introduction

Grant someone complete and perfect knowledge
of the present, and they would scarcely
need to lift a finger to see the future.

— Sainte-Beuve

History has long established a law linking society's political upheavals to its spiritual transformations. This principle traces how art visibly shifts alongside social change, both in its modes of expression and, at least temporarily, in its very ideals. It ranks among history's surest lessons. Great convulsions like wars and revolutions may prove barren in the moment, yet they fertilize the immediate future, finishing off those rules and fashions that threatened to outlive their usefulness. The Great Revolution delivered the coup de grâce to a Classicism that had been dragging on in pitiful exhaustion, barren of living work and breeding only grotesques. Revolution and Empire sparked the Romantic movement into life.

Three crucial points, however, must temper our faith in this law.

Like all living things, the mind follows its own nature. The same driving force—Thought—produces both revolutionary upheavals and artistic achievements. The mind's action underlies events and works alike, which explains why politically turbulent times prove artistically barren. The mind cannot serve two masters. When it throws itself into external affairs and public gestures, it abandons its true, inward realm. Yet it returns there with redoubled vigour after such absence. Action is its lifeblood. It recovers from political exertion through poetic creation. Small wonder, then—indeed, how could it be otherwise?—that these twin activities show such clear correlation. They are two notes from the same voice, two blasts of the same wind…

Or better still, the ebb and flow of tides. The comparison holds. Pure thought is the mind's natural element, and when it overflows into historical action, it seems to breach its eternal bounds, like the sea at high tide. But the ebb inevitably follows. Mind and sea withdraw to their primordial depths. Then comes that blessed hour of luxuriant growth and potent calm, when sea and mind ripple from shore to shore, mirroring the entire sky in their crystalline depths.

The fishermen, driven off by the flood, naturally assume the ebb follows from the flow. Perhaps. But such consequences reach back further. Ebb and flow share a common source in the vast waters' expansive force (whether or not some heavenly body exerts its pull), in that universal law of motion governing all existence, that withdrawal of Being into itself after pouring forth into the Infinite. This is the law to which all reduces and in which all finds its symbol, as the sun finds its reflections. Yet

the sea may return to its vastness bearing new colours from its journey, having rolled over ochre cliffs or slate shores whose dissolved pigments left their mark, reddish or black sediment in the waves. Human Thought takes on such colouring from its social ventures in roughly these proportions, reflecting it in turn through philosophical and artistic endeavour—though soon enough the tinted current vanishes in the immense blue mass.

Thus art's fluctuations with society find their explanation in common origins. But there is more to consider.

This fertilization of Art through external upheaval may not be essential to aesthetic development, which neither blindly nor inevitably bows to outside forces. Instead, it pursues, era by era, an ascent that stands apart from society's chancy experiments. External influence alone cannot explain that unconscious consistency which prevents aesthetic periods from following one another randomly, where each fresh ideal answers a need not so much new as unmet, another conquest adding its particular spoils to the accumulated treasure.

True, the turmoil of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped birth Romanticism. Yet one suspects it did more harm than good in the direction it imposed. Without such external disturbances, perhaps Thought would have remained stuck in that torpor where it could only mock itself with lewd or trivial pantomime. Still, Thought gained nothing from the rebellious spirit that suddenly erupted. Mirroring a society that rejected the Ancien Régime's rules and leapt from one flawed system (rotten with age) into another (flawed by novelty and brazen contempt for tradition), the new literature likewise turned on the old, rashly proclaiming all rules abolished. In their hatred of etiquette, they scrapped Order itself. They couldn't win the right to feel without stripping the mind of its right to think.

Here indeed lies the dual nature of early Romanticism. Born from Thought's own sorrow at its long immobility and self-imprisonment, it stirred to life and restored the rights of Feeling—its genuine achievement and lasting contribution. Yet corrupted by Thought's self-disgust after its excesses, by frustration with self-imposed boundaries (meant to prevent a slide into chaos but which had turned suffocating, making obedience a bondage), Romanticism effectively if not explicitly proclaimed that obedience was the fault, thinking the disease, limits on human nature the danger. It plunged into frenzied disorder that mocked true movement. This flaw alienates us from the formula and reduces it, initially, to mere reaction.

The Romantics never grasped that this sort of anti-rule—"In all things, thou shalt do the opposite of thy predecessors"—stripped the artist of free will just as effectively as etiquette itself. This is why Romanticism, holding all things equal in its confused vision, proclaimed through its chief legislator this remarkable claim: "In art, beauty and ugliness have equal value." The witches in Macbeth had uttered something similar: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." But they were witches, speaking lies. Victor Hugo echoed the lie with the earnestness of a rather guileless sincerity.

The worst part—though providentially so—is that he was right, if only for a time. Once the spirit surrenders its natural starring role in the drama of the soul, once the human Composite renounces its power to think (that is, to choose between Truth and falsehood), then Beauty and Ugliness, those twin species of True and False, cease to matter. Nothing counts any more but motion

itself—stirring, shifting, thrashing about in whatever direction. Picture a child who, after hours of sitting still, stretches and flails to get the blood flowing again. After the deathly torpor of the eighteenth century, blood desperately needed to course through modern veins. Revolution and Empire in the physical sphere, Romanticism in the spiritual, served as agents of this great work.

Here was an age made entirely of gestures, wildly enamoured of life—but wildly, meaning beyond life's bounds, and thus fatally so. Hence this epoch's meaning lies in its backward turn, spurning the future to revisit the past through history.

Such sweeping claims would prove unfair if we looked closely at particulars. Among those who quietly formed the bedrock of the Romantic evolution, who carried out what I have called its "genuine work"—Lamartine, Vigny, de Nerval and Senancour, to stay within France—Art preserved its essential principle. This principle remains unchanging because it constitutes humanity's share of eternity, immune to contradictory circumstances because it represents the fixed point where relationships reveal their distinctions.

Yet these four poets—even the first, who though he liked playing roles in life, did so as a prince might dabble in theatre, to pass the time—were aliens in their own century, solitary dreamers whom events left untouched. Indeed, might we not argue (since works of genius belong to us like natural phenomena, like mountains or seas that shift with our perspective) that Vigny's divine poem Eloa, beyond its many unfaded meanings, served in its day as an elevated satire of those muddled theories that welcomed the grotesque and monstrous into Art? Isn't Eloa's love for the Accursed One precisely that impossible union then imagined between Beauty and Ugliness?

It was a doomed, impossible union. Eloa, seeking to redeem the Prince of Evil, falls with him, having failed even to bring him comfort. Still, these strident theories—not the heart of Romantic innovation but its inevitable excess—lent it colour and served as its Scripture: false scripture and false colour, clearly derived from Revolutionary doctrine, those rebellious creeds that Napoleon's victories forced upon the defeated world, as Muhammad spread the Koran's triumph by the sword.

We shall see how a remarkably coherent design seems to have guided modern humanity's successive impulses to examine itself first through thought, then through feeling and bearing, then through physical makeup and sensation. For now, we need only establish these proven points.

First, political and artistic movements correlate because both spring from the deeper evolution of human thought—an evolution that may surface initially as political change but naturally and primarily aims at spiritual transformation (philosophical or aesthetic), which only seems to result from political upheaval.

Second, the knock-on effect of political change on spiritual change, rather than revealing the latter's true significance, tends to corrupt it. For this significance to achieve its authentic fullness, the external political turmoil that appeared to spark the new spiritual movement must fade entirely from memory.

Yet more recent events, including our present moment, offer two witnesses to a third and perhaps most crucial point. As suggested earlier, the aesthetic idea evolves on its own, more reliably so, independent of external shocks, driven by its own inner force of expansion.

Consider how Naturalism—that chapter in Art's history devoted to studying Sensation—emerged during politically tranquil times. And today, this fresh movement of Art and the arts toward a new Ideal, this shift whose reality no one disputes (whatever debate surrounds its aims), whether we call it Decadence or Symbolism—what social earthquake produced it?

These opening reflections seek to untangle Art's history, particularly that of Literature, from political history. They allow us to examine, nearly free from external contingencies, how the modern spirit has carved, century by century across three centuries, its ideal statue of Beauty.

The previous chapter addressed Beauty's relationship with Truth, the substance of things. Here we try to clarify how, in terms of expression, the trajectory of Established Forms illuminates the new forms that today struggle forth, still rather hazily, under pressure from so many fresh influences.

I.

Analysis

The Modern Spirit bears two hallmarks. Baptised in Christianity, it is at heart *spiritualist*, and from this baptismal inheritance it has preserved one cardinal tendency: it is *analytical* to such a degree that the novel of psychological analysis can justly be said to have sprung from the Confessional[22]. Indeed, so thoroughly analytical that it could only attain Synthesis by making a decisive break with its earliest education[23] and marrying the speculative and intuitive gifts of its Asian heritage to the scientific and deductive powers of its Greek inheritance. In this magnificent attempt to forge unity from the diverse strands of its intellectual life, it runs one great risk: that of losing—or at least diluting—the spiritualist or mystical character that has thus far been its governing force, that most sharply sets it apart from the men of antiquity, and that bathes it in the most precious light the Gospel ever kindled in the world.

Yet before we come to this momentous contemporary question of Synthesis, we must once more consult History—though now only the History of *Beauty's expression through the Written Word*—to show how the modern spirit, in pursuing its aesthetic vision of "Man in the World", has from the first instinctively dissected its *subject* into fundamental, constituent parts, then subjected each part in turn to the same analytical scrutiny.

To keep within reasonable bounds, we shall not venture back to where logic might lead us—to that far-off dawn after the Ancient World's twilight, when the Middle Ages broke dimly upon us, and man, still drunk on pagan pleasures yet newly converted to the Religion of Tears, began to mumble his ignorance and pain, to surrender himself to priestly guidance, and, though not always checking his innocent exuberance, at least struggled through the stern alphabet of Contrition and raised, with smarting hands, the heavy veil that hid beatitudes still far beyond reach. How Christ, step by step, banished from the minds of rising generations—who still harboured vague memories of the Pantheon—every deity save himself, and through his Apostles to the Nations imposed a wholly priestly literature, into which only men of learning like Rabelais smuggled echoes of ancient truths. Such themes would richly repay attention but would lead us far astray! Since we must limit ourselves to French literature, let us begin at the close of the sixteenth century, which—as though staging a perfect emblem for our purposes—brought paganism back to life, nearly smothered the authentic modern inspiration (which is Christian), yet ultimately bowed to the contrived but commanding force of a Christianity likewise reborn, and made Homer and Virgil submit to Bossuet.

The Soul Alone

The most striking characteristic of the seventeenth century is its obsession with thought. To this altar it sacrifices everything: the soaring imagination of the *chansons de geste*, even its pride in national glory. One thing alone matters—to *fathom* the essence of those mysteries its forebears were happy simply to *dream* about.

Many who have judged this age have fallen into error, I believe, by seeing only one side of its dual nature: either the pagan strain it inherited from the Renaissance, or the purely Christian element which, after its brief entanglement with pagan influences and the civil wars of heresy, emerged triumphant alongside the political victory of Divine Right. Yet surely when the new spirit raided the mythological storehouse of antiquity, it sought mere window-dressing, artistic scaffolding for those profound meditations that alone held value. It sought a gossamer veil of dream that left unchallenged the supremacy of ideal realities.

Ideal Realities—here precisely lies the seventeenth century's sole preoccupation. Ideal Realities: God, the World, the Human *Soul*. These three terms float free in pure speculation, suspended in that rarefied atmosphere of general ideas and metaphysical abstractions. Priests, Philosophers and Poets alike wield Aristotle's logic, though not his philosophy. They are Platonists through and through, whether they admit it or deny it. From Aristotle they take only his dialectical toolkit, and that secondhand through the Scholastics and Aquinas. From Plato they inherit faith in the Ideal Forms, dwelling entirely in this ethereal realm.

Christianity figures here as something less than the spirit of the age, for even Descartes—who locks his religious beliefs safely away in a Holy of Holies and commands as much scientific knowledge as any man of his time—instinctively distrusts the evidence of the senses, finding solid ground only in the self-evidence of pure thought.

Descartes's vision of humanity is not merely generalised but utterly idealised, with mind as absolute sovereign. Nowhere is this more stark than in his *Traité des Passions*. This same conception of man belongs equally to Bossuet. Though he acknowledges the distinction Scripture draws between 'the old man' and 'the new man', his genius imposes Gospel law upon what amounts to an eternal abstraction of reason. Even these twin concepts of 'new man' and 'old man' he lifts straight from Holy Writ. But 'ancient man' and 'modern man'? Bossuet cannot tell them apart.

Only two poles exist for him, between which he labours to broker a reverent accord: God and man. In this enterprise, time's mutations simply don't signify. Only the God and Man of all ages concern him, only eternal verities. Novelty he loathes. If he is himself a dazzling innovation in literary artistry—a point of view he would have scorned—he delights in the majestic reiteration of unchanging truths, raising affirmation like a bronze rampart against the doubts of the century. Like Moses on his mountain, he stands firm upon the rock of faith.

This faith he shields from internal corruption, guards in its divine wholeness against the cursed spirit of schism. Yet like Moses too, his care extends only to the Chosen People, whom he watches over

jealously against heresy, against Protestant or Quietist deviation. As for the Gentiles, the Unbelievers, he marvels—in all the lofty sense he gave that word—that such creatures can even exist. He finds the very idea of arguing with them inconceivable, flattens the infant spirit of science and criticism beneath his magnificent scorn, and passes this lapidary judgement: 'Unbelievers lack a sense.'

Racine's view of humanity, though distinct from that of Bossuet or Descartes, remains an ideal abstraction nonetheless. True, he grasps the concept of modern man, of modern passion. Yet even this modern, passionate being dissolves, in Racine's hands, into a phantom of the soul. His psychological inquiry strips away from its chosen passion all those messy human realities that would normally surround it, complicate it, amplify or mute it, preserve its essential force or pervert it.

Racine's *characters* possess a truth of convention; his *passions*, a truth of reality. For his *dramatis personae*, a rough sketch of historical action, a loose approximation of period features will do. But the passions demand the full apparatus of rigorous, subtle psychology. His characters are neither specifically Jewish, Greek, nor Roman; their designations—king, confidant, priest, warrior—are mere tags. Yet their passions are human, preserving every grain of human truth. Indeed, the very names of Racine's heroes have shed whatever meaning tradition gave them to become synonyms for the passions that consume them. These figures in their fantastical dress, whose physical presence eludes us, inhabit translucent bodies where only passion's flame burns bright.

The seventeenth century's genius lies in this: a desire to grasp spiritual truth through just one of its facets. Bossuet presents the human soul reaching towards the Gospel's God, and his masterwork, *Les Élévations sur les Mystères*, sings the hymn of that soul, trembling yet magnified in knowing its object. Descartes shows the human soul peering into the World's abyss, recording in his *Meditations* what he was privileged to discover about the universal riddle. Racine reveals the human soul drawn toward Passion's consuming flame, offering us through his Theatre what he could divine of this mystery, as boundless as the other two.

TO KNOW—Behold the rallying cry of the century.

'Yet it knew nothing!' comes the retort.

'Knew nothing'—Bossuet, who brings together and crowns the full blaze of Christian illumination! 'Knew nothing'—Descartes, who laid the foundations of modern philosophical method, wedded algebra to geometry, and blazed the trail where Germany would find the ideas we still inhabit! 'Knew nothing'—Racine, from whom those psychologists most attuned to the spirit of our age still seek instruction!

But fine. Let them have known nothing. Let's grant that the religious blinkers worn by philosophers and poets no less than theologians left them all in darkness. Bossuet becomes a Church Father who missed his century; Descartes produced nothing better than his Theory of Vortices; Racine amounts to empty passionate quibbling, no doubt paralysed by fear of the *Index*. Yet even within this travesty, their true greatness endures. *It lies in how they wielded their power of thought*.

What they thought about, even what they concluded, matters less here. To give them their due, we need only recognise that the seventeenth century's minds thought with a purity, sincerity, and nobility unmatched for fifteen hundred years. Why bristle at the Christian uniform these men of sound

reason and good faith wore? Why, in our age of doubt, do we so grudgingly acknowledge their pride in serving at the altar? Better to recall what senile twilight Reason inhabited before they arose.

Not that I discount the genius of Aquinas and Paracelsus, the Church Fathers and the Alchemists. Those spiritual beams from two distinct sources converged to cast the same light upon the world. They animate the seventeenth century itself, where Bossuet draws his strength from loyalty to Thomist doctrine, where Descartes seeks initiation into Rosicrucian mysteries. But until Bossuet, Descartes, and Racine, thinking remained the province of a mysterious few, hardly the hallmark of an age or nation.

This great awakening—to proclaim God's Christian truth, to uncover the World's philosophical truth, to probe Man's passionate truth—signals the defining innovation of our classical age. In this epoch, the human soul devoted itself entirely to the human soul. It was our age of pure reason, the momentous hour when the modern mind grasped the worth of exercising its intelligence across every open field, its gift for reading cause in effect, its power to understand, that is, to bind scattered effects through their cause.

I applaud its keeping evangelical metaphysics as its North Star, which may have narrowed its horizon but at least provided one. Without it, minds unused to liberty, barely acquainted with intellectual action, would have drifted from one delusion to the next. The wild flights of even sage Descartes himself show us what fanciful systems the questing minds of the age would have crashed into had they all, like him, swept their religious beliefs from the table.

'But this fixation on abstract ideas,' the critics continue, 'cost us our National Literature. Sketched by the Troubadours, especially the *Chanson de Roland*'s poet, by the Mystery playwrights, the *Roman de la Rose* authors, by Villon and the Chroniclers, it veered off course under pagan influence at the Renaissance but should have found renewal as Christianity returned to prominence.'

My answer: the seventeenth century saw no Christian revival, no reawakening of the mediaeval spirit from the lovely but lethal dream of the Renaissance. The modern age was dawning. By adopting the name of Catholicism, evangelical doctrine did several things at once. It drew inward, took stock of its adherents, set its dogmas in stone, whilst scrutinising under Reason's lamp whatever it needed to borrow from ancient traditions presumed dead but now proving remarkably alive, even evangelical. The human spirit seemed to be checking its inventory of established truths just as it prepared to sail the vast sea of modern speculation.

Or better, to match the scientific age this seventeenth century was launching, picture an aeronaut loading ballast before cutting his moorings. The weight slows his rise but steadies it, and by jettisoning bags judiciously, he can climb ever higher.

A national literature! What goes by that name was really provincial literature in the Middle Ages. Not French but Occitan and Oïl[tn4], German, Walloon, Anglo-Saxon, Breton, Basque, or Provençal. And what splendid fortune if, in losing this so-called national literature, we gained something greater: the birth of universal literature, drawing from humanity's common store of legends to create art shaped by the unique genius inherent in every people!

But if we accept this accusation whilst narrowing its scope, only the surface of the seventeenth century appears anti-national. I have already noted how Corneille, Racine and Molière, whilst

plundering ancient literature for their myths, both Christianised and thoroughly Frenchified them. It's an old truism: these Achilleses and Andromaques, these Phèdres and Cinnas, these Pompeys and Amphitryons are nothing more than courtiers of Louis XIV in fancy dress. Call them Bayard, Godefroy de Bouillon or Joan of Arc, and they wouldn't be a jot more French. Less so, if anything, given the historical spadework their names would have demanded of the poets, at a time when history was still in its infancy.

Besides, nothing is quite so misguided as this literary infatuation—this historical infatuation, even—with the chimera of patriotic literature. It utterly misconstrues the finest quality of the century we still call 'Great'. Our poetic heritage lives in the Arthurian romances, in the *Chansons de Geste*, in *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in *Orlando Furioso*, and the rest. Why uproot them?[tn5] That work was complete, as finished as any history of the past, when the Grand Siècle dawned. Its greatness lay precisely in grasping, with unerring instinct, what modern Art demands: to capture in the contemporary moment what is eternal in human truth—forgive the relative use of 'eternal'.

Bossuet and the Doctors, Racine and the Poets pursued this aim down two distinct paths, driven by different impulses. The divine, spiritualist impulse drew its Christian hue from the age, from Catholicism in full flower, and from mediaeval memory. The human, sensualist impulse took its pagan tint from the era, from the Renaissance afterglow, and from classical antiquity. Yet these twin impulses, these parallel currents, mingled and merged into the mighty river of classical unity.

The Doctors' language bore the stamp of ancient learning, remained Greek and Latin. The Poets' imagination bore the mark of modern education, remained Christian. In theological treatises and from the very pulpit, teaching harks back to Athens and Rome. Beneath the poet's pen and on the very stage, Homer's sacred fables lose their power, fade, dissolve into nothing, leaving only the baptised soul of humanity itself. And as if to consecrate this mystical marriage of traditions, a Doctor penned *Télémaque*, a Poet wrote *Polyeucte*.

Even the tangible framework of the theatre speaks volumes. That interminable antechamber where modern audiences shiver, those costume-less actors with their stilted gestures and monotonous delivery, all that scenic poverty proclaims one thing: the only true stage exists in the Poet's mind and the imaginative reach of his audience. He offers them not spectacle but *contemplation*. The perspective belongs to the heroic psychologist, Corneille, the passionate psychologist, Racine, or the moralist psychologist, Molière.

Timeless heroism, passion, morality: truths about man's inner life, about the quintessential types of the human soul. This is what the Poet means to convey and what spectators come to hear. *Temperament* remains undiscovered; only *character* matters. The *picturesque*—that *romantic* bridge between classical character and naturalist temperament—is utterly unknown. Man lacks costume because he lacks a body, because he is pure soul. How could anyone grasp the interplay between physical and psychological states? Man is not yet a creature of organs and impulses.

When Molière acknowledges the body, it's merely as comic relief, grist for the laughter mill. What he fundamentally ignores is the tangle of animal and spiritual passions. Like all his contemporaries, he sees only fixed characters. He inevitably selects from man's passional repertoire, picks one trait, one alone, and his heroes become misers, hypocrites, libertines before they are men. Were Harpagon truly human, he would have his moment of weakness, a flash of generosity. Were

Tartuffe truly human, he would have his lapse of inconsistency, a burst of candour. But these names label vices, not men: Avarice itself, not the avaricious man; Hypocrisy itself, not the hypocrite. Hence their rock-solid consistency.

Mistake these ambulatory abstractions for flesh-and-blood individuals and you are in for a shock. Comedy offers counterfeit life; Tragedy, counterfeit death. For Molière, life isn't the marriage of soul and body. The body merely tags along with the soul. Sganarelle clings to his, Alceste shrugs his off. He may protest:

Guenille si l'on veut, ma guenille m'est chère!

[Rags they may be, but they're my rags and I'm fond of them!]

Not that fond! He manages well enough without. For Racine, death isn't the soul's divorce from the body. More obviously even than in Molière, life never sprang from their union in the first place. Logically, death in Racine should mean the extinction of the passion that drives his tragedy. Phèdre ought to die when she stops loving Hippolyte. But such logic would satisfy neither the classical tradition Racine devotedly maintains nor the dramatic tension he intuits without fully grasping.

Hence those endings that feel grafted on, those gratuitous suicides that made perfect sense in Greek tragedy, where heroes writhe beneath inexorable Fate, but ring hollow once those heroes embrace Christian feeling. This view of classical tragedy as simply a crisis point explains and vindicates why Corneille and Racine bowed to Aristotle's triple unities. The rules helped more than hindered. They would have been at sea trying to steer their phantom characters through years and years, across multiple locations, through chains of action that only a vivid, urgent sense of life can weld into dramatic unity. Unity of action was thrust upon them by their very conception: the death throes of a passion at its peak. And for such throes, one place, one day, proved more than enough.

This unity of moral preoccupation emerges still more clearly, if less dazzlingly, in the Moralists proper, from La Rochefoucauld to La Bruyère. Their very titles—*Les Maximes* and *Les Caractères*—tell the story. La Rochefoucauld embodies all the defects of his genre and temperament. In him, classical inspiration, stripped to its bare bones, simply dries up. His outlook is cramped, his wit needle-sharp, pricking rather than probing. His dread of the sublime warps his vision. Here is a writer, a man, whom one cannot love and who leaves no mark on posterity. Indeed, he turns his back on the future.

La Bruyère faces forward like a man ready to embrace what's coming, a thinker prepared to grasp it, a writer who catches its scent on the wind. The seventeenth-century style, elsewhere so measured and majestic, as fixed as its subject matter, stirs to life in La Bruyère. It quickens, slims down, rejuvenates itself. Though he may neglect the outer world, you would swear he *sees into souls*, perceives their shape, their dress, their gestures. For him alone in his era, the human face amounts to more than its features and isn't merely the soul's mask. It becomes its living expression. La Bruyère grasps physiognomy, senses both the gulf and the bridge between passion and the tears or laughter it sparks. In this, he reveals a distinctly modern sensibility

Moreover, he seems gentler than his peers with human frailty, more alive to intentions. Whilst he may not possess the picturesque touch exactly, he has something close: a feeling for the kind of absurdity that isn't comic or stock, that skews the usual angles, that springs from individual quirk. With

him, *mankind* nearly becomes *particular men*. The whole of the modern novel lies dormant in La Bruyère. He almost lets character grow complex and reveal itself through temperament.[tn6]

Yet like all his contemporaries, his primary lens trains itself on the soul and nothing but the soul. If he strikes us as sharper-eyed than his rivals, closer to our sensibility, it's because he has given clearer form and substance to the century's overarching endeavour. Apart from La Bruyère, this entire century devoted solely to the human soul has, perhaps in the interest of clarity, rendered it through symbols—poetic tales, drama, fables—or distilled it into consequences—*Maximes* and *Pensées*. La Bruyère alone questions it directly, watches it breathe, *takes its pulse*!

True, Racine and La Fontaine observe too, but for them it's merely groundwork, hidden from view. They present only the polished result in fable or tragedy. And surely their laboratory is their own intuition, imagination, or personal experience rather than the living, breathing humanity that suffers and rejoices around them. La Bruyère pioneered observation. He glimpsed the value of particular truths, conceived the notion of studying humanity in motion, and this everyday drama, raw and unadorned, struck him as worth preserving. Both microscopic in focus and sweeping in ambition, he captured visible reality in vibrant sketches that outrun their subjects, an overreach that betrays the classical writer within.

This same vision takes different form in La Fontaine. He too has watched life unfold, and dreamed besides, weaving life and dream into his fables. A persistent mistake dogs La Fontaine's reputation today. Because he populates his stage with plants and animals, people insist he has a feeling for nature. They marvel at his grasp of his symbolic creatures' behaviour. In truth, he understands the Lion and the Ant no more deeply than the humble Pot of clay or its iron counterpart. He knows all equally, having studied Lion and Earthen Pot solely in his mind's eye.

La Fontaine transcends his century far less than La Bruyère. He is nothing more—though nothing less—than Racine's exact contemporary. His lions, bears and foxes are no more genuinely animal than Achilles, Agamemnon and Iphigenia are authentically Greek. 'But see,' they cry, 'how sly his fox, how busy his ant!' Indeed, they display their stock traits, just as Racine's heroes do. And look how fierce Achilles is! But that's worlds away from the deep insight into beasts' and objects' secret lives that people credit to La Fontaine. Achilles and the Lion are human emblems, full stop.

It's actually rather melancholy that La Fontaine, confronted with nature's stupendous pageant of supernatural, many-personed life, should have shrunk to the narrow human vantage point. He is utterly of his age, which never dreamed of toppling Man from the throne he had seized at the core of all that is. What ages must pass, what scientific breakthroughs, social upheavals, artistic and literary sea-changes, before humanity conceives that invisible, tremendous, universal life in which our individual existence vanishes like a drop in the ocean!

Pythagoras had trembled before it, as had Kalidasa, who could hear the mimosa and blue lotus singing their lament for vanished Shakuntala.[tn7] But these seers lie so remote in the silent hollow of time that their era and teachings blur together in our eyes with the haze from which tomorrow's suns will rise. From the days when La Fontaine wrote, at any rate, we must wait nearly two centuries for humanity to recover that sense of Mystery which forms the animating spirit of poetry itself. Wait nearly two centuries for Lamartine's line:

Adore ici l'écho qu'adorait Pythagore,

[Here worship the echo Pythagoras adored,]

for Gérard de Nerval's:

Crains dans le mur aveugle un regard qui t'épie,

[Fear in the blind wall an eye that watches you,]

for Baudelaire's:

La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles:
L'homme y marche à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

[Nature is a temple whose living pillars
Sometimes breathe forth mysterious words:
Man passes there through forests of symbols
That watch him with knowing eyes.]

What gives La Fontaine his lasting claim on posterity, what keeps him alive in our present day, what justifies the rapturous admiration a poet like Théodore de Banville could lavish upon him—this isn't the quality of his thought. It's his style. La Fontaine's style almost invariably soars above his thought, sometimes lending it a deceptive nimbus of dream that one might take for genuine Poetry. Indeed, Taine went so far as to crown him the most authentically Poetic of French poets. Truly, none in his age, precious few since, have possessed this gift for natural harmony that seems to spring forth of its own accord, defying all dissection.

He commands both the rhythm and the phrase. He is at once magnificently lyrical and magnificently controlled. His verse appears nearer to prose than Racine's, yet stands in reality much further from it. Here is a music both logical and weightless, first cousin to that music championed, two centuries on, by a master of our own era[24], modern through and through:

De la musique encore et toujours!
Que ton vers soit la chose envolée
Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée
Vers d'autres cieux à d'autres amours.

Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure
Éparse au vent crispé du matin,
Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thym,
Et tout le reste est littérature.

[Music, music, ever and always!
Let your verse be the winged thing

We sense escaping from a soul in flight
Towards other skies and other loves.

Let your verse be fortune scattered
On the crisp and biting morning air,
Wafting mint and thyme wherever,
And all the rest is literature.]

As has long been observed, what appears to be inequality in La Fontaine's verse—the seemingly irregular rhythm of his lines—can only strike as whimsy or caprice those who haven't the faintest notion what a Strophe is. In sum, he possesses every gift that marks the true Poet: strength that never loses its grace, inborn ingenuity, the lyrical spirit, compositional mastery, dynamism itself, feeling, emotion. Every gift save one, without which all others prove false: he lacks an inner life.

So bewitching is his charm that face to face one cannot judge him. He seduces, he disarms. But memory proves sterner and lays bare the appalling emptiness of this soul adrift between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, those twin centuries of negation. This soul devoid of faith or any hunger for faith, besotted with utilitarian morality, beguiling us with counterfeit compassion[25]. Crack open his works: the *Contes* and the *Fables* answer one another, the latter teaching us how to 'manage our affairs' so as to live according to the former's taste.

Throw in your lot with the shrewd and sly against the reckless and wretched. Hoard what you have, like the Ant, and learn to rebuff the would-be borrower. Learn, like the Fox, to manage the mighty through deception, to mock them whilst sacrificing the weak to their appetites. Sometimes it pays to do a good turn, but never blindly, never without knowing whom you are helping. Take counsel from Self-Interest. Help the Ant, who practises thrift and goes armed: you may have need of her. But send the Grasshopper packing, she who could only sing the summer away.

Yet La Fontaine's most repugnant and telling characteristic is his loathing of all nobility. How deluded were those who sought to cast him as champion of the humble, recalling that moral from *Les Animaux malades de la peste*:

Selon que vous serez puissant ou misérable
Les jugements de cour vous rendront blanc ou noir.

[The court will paint you black or white
According to your power or your plight.]

But does he pity the Ass he is about to parade as ridiculous beside the Lapdog? Does he even pity the Lamb torn apart by the Wolf? Doubtful. I suspect he chiefly begrudges the Wolf his strength. Doesn't he champion patience and the slow passage of time over Force, which he instinctively pairs with 'fury'? Doesn't he have the Fox make a proper fool of the Lion?

In nobility and strength he sees nothing but flaw and pride. The Oak extends its protection to the Reed, and this springs, surely, from good nature, real generosity. Why then are we invited to sneer? Though lightning menaces the Oak, the Reed—proud in its smallness—is spared the great perils that

grandeur invites. This Reed is a cunning creature, the Fox's own cousin. It jeers at the Oak, the Oak about to perish! La Fontaine won't even spare the dying! And anyway, why does he conveniently forget that this Reed, so smug in its littleness, will be trampled by the first passing foot?

This wretched morality, this black and rotten core beneath so delightful a genius—perhaps it's unfair to lay it all at La Fontaine's door. Are we not witnessing here the inevitable outcome of a century-long deepening of the mind's study, which proved excellent training for reason but whose tangible, immediate fruits could only be exhaustion, revulsion even, despair even at reasoning itself, having reasoned in a vacuum about a phantom humanity, static and bodiless?

What discoveries did they make, these Poets who took the passions as their dreamscape, these Moralists who anatomised the mechanisms of Vice and Virtue? Corneille presents us with nothing but heroes. He holds humanity in the loftiest regard and pays it the highest tribute. But his tribute is excessive, his regard too lofty, and his hoisted-up humanity bears no resemblance to ours. His relentless Sublimity crushes our spirits, and measuring ourselves against his grandeur, we confess our pitiful smallness.

Racine summons forth a pageant of illustrious, wretched souls, shattered, flayed by Passion, bleeding and wailing, their very nobility compounding their anguish. As we track these melancholy shades that mirror the darkest hours of our destiny, these noble souls whom some pitiless, inexorable power torments and corrupts, we confess our pitiful weakness.

Molière speaks much the same language, only more ruthlessly still. He proclaims our pettiness ridiculous, our frailty contemptible. Corneille with his impossible grandeurs, Racine with his inescapable agonies, merely drove us to despair. Molière makes us sick of ourselves.

All the while, La Rochefoucauld has taken another route down into this same wretched human soul and pronounces that there is nothing, nothing but Evil. Even beneath the splendour of those heroic deeds to which *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Rodogune*, *Le Cid* beckoned us, there lurks a monster that transforms these phantoms of valour, sacrifice, and mercy into spectres of shame, and he gives it a name: Self-Love.

La Bruyère might prove more lenient, might wish to entertain us, yet he only deepens our melancholy with his comedy of our quirks, our lapses, the thousand faults in our habits and poses.

Which way to turn? From their pulpit heights the Doctors echo the Poets and Moralists, drumming into us that our nature is despicably small and feeble. Granted, they append that whilst man can achieve nothing alone, he can achieve everything through Him who gives him strength. But already humanity is turning its back on this Gospel God who demands of it, when all's said and done, much the same impossible virtues as Corneille's heroes. Humanity stands desperate and nauseated.

Which way will it turn? The way La Fontaine and good sense prescribe. Since heroism is a pipe dream, and pointless besides, rooted as it is in ego and self-regard, forget about it. Since the passions bring nothing but misery, wisdom begins by shunning them. Since man cannot rise to nobility or virtue, let him at least live undisturbed. Let self-interest be his law, though he would better keep quiet about it. Let him outwit that grandeur whose hollowness he knows, outwit misfortune, that is, nature itself. Let him savour his modest pleasures and, armed only with his bitter experience, let him glide past all serious matters with a knowing smile that mocks the lot. And thus the eighteenth century is born.

It's the backlash against Corneille, it's La Fontaine in action. Or rather, it's the seventeenth century's inexorable conclusion. The Tragedies, the Comedies, the Maxims, the Fables, and even the Sermons have led us straight to the *Contes*.

A voice cries out in protest, vibrant, unmistakably human. It is the voice of omnipotent Reason, of burning Imagination, of a diseased Body. It is the voice of a man: Pascal.

The seventeenth century's purest greatness bears this name, which belongs equally to the future. Pascal saw beyond his age to glimpse the catastrophe into which such single-minded spirituality would plunge the human soul. He foresaw ravenous sensuality looming on the darkening horizon, spawned by reason worn out from reigning alone too long, and by flesh rebelling against centuries of neglect. With the eyes of both man and genius, Pascal witnessed the emerging needs of days to come. He heard the question Humanity would pose to the Sphinx, for Humanity herself sometimes rises up sphinx-like before that other, eternally silent one.

Pascal thought to find the Sphinx's answer in the Gospel, which props up our frailties with divine support, and so he embarked upon his Demonstration of the Christian Religion. The making of this work, never to be completed, unfolds as a drama more harrowing than the poets' darkest imaginings. The scant testimony of those who witnessed this inner torment stirs our pity and wonder whilst leaving us hungry for more.

We seem to watch Pascal begin his book trembling with passionate certainty, a certainty that by its very fervour eluded his grasp. And slowly, as those scraps of paper accumulated, scrawled in fever, offspring of genius and sleeplessness, his soul, heavy with the future it yearned to redeem, began opening to the very doubts it had vowed to conquer. It felt compelled to satisfy the scientific spirit dwelling within, yet found itself powerless to explain what God is, or even to prove His existence!

And so the most earnest and profound mind ever known begins to hedge and prevaricate, loses itself in wishful visions, feeds on superstition and sorcery. Here unfolds that murky, pitiful tale at which only the Devil, and perhaps Voltaire, might smile: the tale of Pascal's *Talisman*. Here too we find that troubled soul mortifying itself within its deeply afflicted frame, those fearsome penances, those fasts and austerities meant to purchase Truth but winning only death.

And the vast achievement of this immeasurable spirit lies barren, a desolate ruin echoing not with the longed-for Answer but with the very question the future would pose, a question that sounds like a moan. Yet this question, though Pascal never knew the comfort of it, harboured the very key to its own answer, and this ruin forms the splendid arch connecting the Church of old to the Church of modern times.

Pascal as thinker, scientist, and theologian stands as a double protest: against both the genuine degradations of the dawning century and the hollow magnificence of the dying one. He protests against the arrogance of cleaving man in two and feeding him only spiritual truths, and equally against the counter-arrogance of embracing this grotesque division whilst clinging only to sensual truths.

Though it seems almost vulgar to speak of literature when discussing such a figure, we might observe that Pascal, though consumed by thoughts, the most fervent thoughts, those that rise like smoke from the Mysteries, yet throbbing with life's whole tumult, alive to passion and human feeling,

and armed besides with that scientific mind alert to how material causes shape the soul as it stirs and acts—that he emerges as a poet for our present moment, for the age of synthesis.

Pascal stands as our contemporary with Balzac and Edgar Poe, whose kindred spirit he shares. He is a forerunner, a lighthouse still blazing from the past. In him and through him, through this great soul's rupture in the combat between old and new spirit fought within its bounds, the complete Modern Ideal found both articulation and first embodiment. In the fierce concentration of his thought, in the pulse and hue of his prose, in the temper and lifeblood of his genius, Pascal belongs to the nineteenth century[26].

Sentiment Alone

Théophile Gautier dozing through Racine whilst Rachel holds the stage: could there be a more perfect image of the modern mind exhausted by thought? Its natural calling now, the fresh and logical use of its powers, lies in feeling, in stirring itself up, in fashioning a costume that both reflects and magnifies its restlessness. Ask it to think? It falls asleep.

To do Romanticism justice, without undue harshness or indulgence, we must carefully distinguish the various impulses that shaped, directed, and bounded its course.

It emerges around 1810 and fades around 1850. Yet not everything within these dates belongs to it. Balzac springs from deeper roots, cuts through the movement, and extends far beyond it in both directions. Joubert safeguards for Tomorrow what Yesterday's traditions held dear. Stendhal stands almost aloof from his age, a man of the future. With certain poets, one work is romantic whilst another is synthetic: witness Goethe's *Werther* and *Faust*, or Vigny's *Chatterton* and *Les Destinées*. Even Victor Hugo, standard-bearer of the new school, remains a vast, chaotic compendium of every formula and every opinion.

How then to distinguish what truly belongs to Romanticism from what it shares with schools ancient or yet to come?

A more pointed question suggests the answer: what struck the generation of 1820 as novel? Not the depths of passion but their outward show, their visible expression. Not God's profound, metaphysical essence but His external face: nature. The immediately visible and tangible, or more philosophically, nature's impact on man through feeling, man's response to nature through expression. This is Romanticism. It cannot hold its tongue and gather itself, cannot stay still to think more clearly, for it does not think at all. It feels and speaks, or rather shouts. We humans habitually close our eyes when the mind is at work, shielding its independence, sparing it ambient distractions, turning our gaze inward. The proof that Romanticism doesn't think? It keeps its eyes open. It flings them wide, naively, like a waking child or like that primordial man whose senses Buffon depicts stirring one by one to life. It gazes, wonders, delights, content with mere appearances, never probing beneath the surface for hidden truth. Life fascinates it: life in motion with its shifting hues, everything that moves and passes.

Look at the poets it champions from the past, those it instantly celebrates in the present.

The eighteenth century was one protracted death. But death nurtures life. Whilst sensual France dozed smiling amid her splendid degradations, honouring neither past nor future, that very future was taking shape according to the grand traditions of the past. Newton, following Kepler, had formulated the law of gravitation; Kant was born; Germany's philosophers would soon articulate the ideas destined to fertilise our century. Sometimes Life works through death's own agents to return to its wellsprings. Voltaire reveals Newton to the French, thereby serving that scientific spirit which, though he knew too little and too poorly to do more than make it say No, would later, once liberated, pursue the noble path towards luminous certainties. In Voltaire's hands, Science, which demands above all silence and reverence, yielded only the noise of scorn and vanity. From England Voltaire also imported

Shakespeare: an entertaining barbarism, an amusing oddity. He understood Shakespeare no better than Newton, and it galled him to see the spirited response shown by those of his nation to the great Philosopher and great Poet exceed his prescribed limits. Yet this was mere enthusiasm. What could eighteenth-century Frenchmen truly appreciate in Shakespeare? Had they genuinely loved and grasped *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they would have ceased being eighteenth-century Frenchmen. They shelved Letourneur's translation between Crébillon and Florian, decidedly preferring these, finding one more tragic, the other more touching.

The nineteenth century dawns and the Romantics claim Shakespeare as their own. Did the Cénacle understand him better than the salons? Scarcely! At least, scarcely more deeply. They read him with fresher eyes, not keener ones. In his theatre they saw Motion, the weight of stage machinery, daggers and poison vials, blood spilt, dark cloaks, dramatic intrigue: pure surface. The quasi-divine elements of Shakespeare's genius slipped past his imitators unnoticed.

Would you have the facts speak? Consider Shakespeare's influence on Hugo's dramas, then read his book on *William Shakespeare*: procedural questions of form, platitudes about ideas and passions in general, historical observations, pretexts for railing against old rules. Let us now draw from Goethe:

"All those presentiments about man and destiny that had haunted me since childhood with vague disquiet, I find in Shakespeare explained and fulfilled; he illuminates every mystery for us, *though one cannot say where the key to the riddle lies*."

Goethe, at home with German dramatic movement, isn't sidetracked by this aspect of English drama. He penetrates to the essence: what he seeks in a poet is the nature of his governing ideas. He loves Shakespeare because *Hamlet*'s author suffers from the same sublime affliction that torments *Faust*'s creator. Both are possessed by causes, and their symbols are beautiful precisely as the vestments of Truth. Yet Goethe, whose poetic gift was crowned by critical awareness, however much he reveres Shakespeare's greatness, knows its limits: Shakespeare illuminates every mystery without yielding the riddle's key. Put differently, he halts where God would begin. It is only there that the unmatched insight of Shakespeare comes to an end, like a spark swallowed by a brazier's blaze. I may have overlooked something: he is further constrained by his art's boundaries, that unconscious art, the Dramatic Art that freezes the central fiction round which passion, yearning to soar free, wheels captive.

A poet one might still cite even after Goethe, M. Théodore de Banville, made this observation: "Of course I worship Shakespeare, and that scarcely does him justice; for me he is the sovereign spirit of poetic art, and I understand why Berlioz invoked him like a father in his romantic agonies. Yet every fiction, every dramatised event put upon the stage suffers from holding far less interest than the embellishments the poet weaves around it. While the movements of the human soul he captures remain eternally varied and surprising, the events themselves stay fixed, tyrannising us with their stubborn plots." Shakespeare tried repeatedly to escape this shackle, in his enchanted comedies, for instance, and in *Hamlet*, which predictably enough has been called insufficiently theatrical. His audience, that grave and violent English public who delight in melancholy so long as you relieve it with outrageous clowning, all the funnier for being delivered deadpan, didn't always follow him into these bold experiments. More often than not, Shakespeare had to bow to theatrical convention and groundling taste: they cramped his style. Looking back across barely half a century, we find both Shakespeare and Racine pushing against the boundaries of their art and discovering its limitations. Shakespeare would feel his unified dramatic conception brutally constraining the natural exuberance of

his genius, whilst the sheer machinery of theatre perhaps threatened to overwhelm his thought. Racine would wither in the increasingly thin air surrounding him, finding no foothold in theatrical apparatus (having abolished it), his thought laid too bare, his focus narrowed too exclusively to the logical progression of passions, until his work lost substance and simply evaporated. One might have hoped that the French genius which produced Racine, upon discovering Shakespeare, would, without sacrificing its native qualities or descending to *imitation*, seize upon his inspired notion of enlarging dramatic conception to receive the world in all its richness. One might have hoped it would, without coarsening that conception, give it some visual dimension to satisfy the eye whilst keeping the mind engaged. But no such thing happened.

For this to occur, the leaders of the Romantic movement would have needed Goethe's fundamental concern with first principles. Then, undistracted by Shakespeare's scenic freedoms (so novel to them), they might have remained true to Latin sensibility whilst adding flesh-and-blood humanity to pure passion. But the Romantics possessed the souls of children, children playing truant from school. They grabbed at Shakespeare's freedoms as yet another excuse to rebel against Rule and Order. His humanity they left behind, putting onstage instead hollow puppets with neither body nor soul, who gesticulate and declaim in magnificent costumes.

Movement: that's all they took from Shakespeare. The impulse to movement came from elsewhere entirely, and what an appalling gap between cause and effect! This impulse, call it Sentiment, reached the Romantics through Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

I suggested that Rousseau restored the Christian taste for tears to the modern world. True enough in the long run, but not quite accurate in the immediate sense. Rousseau no more knows how to weep than Voltaire knows how to laugh. Voltaire sneers; Rousseau whimpers. Voltaire counterfeits Joy, Rousseau counterfeits Sorrow. Yet the whimpering of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* silenced the sneering of *Candide* because the distant future demanded gravity. The world struck serious poses long before it felt serious emotions. Perhaps it mesmerised itself with posturing until the gesture conjured up genuine feeling. But the pose went far beyond any authentic expression of sincere emotion. Our century opens with a vast wail of anguish, exhaled by young men: wild-haired young men, pale and fever-eyed, young men whom the reborn world courts with smiles but who prefer desolate places and ruins, who summon storms and dare them, never dropping their roles as exiles, pirates, outcasts, rebels. And what lies beneath all this despair? A physical reaction, a dark memory, but above all playacting. We have seen how the seventeenth century convinced man too thoroughly of his insignificance. Pascal declared: "If he boasts, I humble him; *if he humbles himself, I exalt him*…" But Pascal spoke mainly to posterity; his contemporaries ignored him. Man took his Poets and Doctors at their word. He accepted that he was vile and weak, then spent a century getting revenge on God and himself through actual vileness and weakness, through dissipation, laughter, debauchery and madness. Living thus, he grew frayed and frantic, until after his hundred years came a crisis of vanity and savagery: he deified the Reason that Scripture had ridiculed and unleashed the Terror. Then fear of his own handiwork left him trembling in darkness. Sick of laughter, he had wanted gravity and got fury instead. Before achieving true seriousness, he had to endure the nightmare of recent memories. He felt horror, not remorse; he wouldn't simply accept that tyranny was his punishment, wouldn't admit he had half-aborted the Revolution through Terror. He stayed rebellious, but only in a theatrical way. Half-grasping the truth and falsehood in Rousseau's notorious maxim "Man is born good; society corrupts him[27]," he made a

show of resenting the society that had corrupted him, using this as licence to corrupt himself further through the cult of despair. No passion is more pernicious, more inhuman, more diabolical than this.

Despair speaks in *Nevers*; humanity answers with *Always*. How different was that Christian sorrow which Contrition demands: that sorrow reaped as Joy, that sorrow which brings man low only to lift him higher, which lets him plumb his own abyss only to speed his ascent. Modern man paid dearly for daring to abandon Contrition; he kept, as punishment, its initial grief but forfeited its final joy. Despair feeds on itself and breeds only death. Yet how despicable this moral degradation when it lacks even deep sincerity! The Christians' Satan, who roars in *Paradise Lost*:

Evil, be my God!

who replies to Eloa when she damns herself to save him and asks if he is at least happy:

… Plus triste que jamais!

[… More wretched than ever!]

This Satan is sincere in his despair; eternity stretches behind and before him, eternity crushes his guilty head, and if his caress wounds, it is because his laughter is a moan. Manfred's despair is merely the hypochondriac fit of a man prone to such attacks, who writes almost exclusively in their grip, with a certain naïveté, less to court notoriety[28] than to purge himself, to free the mind from its darker hauntings. Yet this same man relishes life with violence and knows hours of frank merriment. Every sensual pleasure captures him: novel spectacles, luxury, love, and glory besides. Why then does he write only when despair gnaws at him? Because he worships it, because he perpetually sins in his soul against Love and Joy. But still, how unnatural! Why commit this dismal sin? The explanation seems so inadequate to the phenomenon that Lord Byron's contemporaries couldn't fathom it and concocted romantic explanations that posterity has mocked. Even Goethe swallowed this penny-dreadful romance and enshrined it in his essay on *Manfred*[29]. The passage bears repeating, as it shows so perfectly that even those swept by the same influences of that turbulent hour, the first light of the hundred years ahead, would have thought Byron's despair contrived without personal sins and sorrows to explain it.

"In this tragedy we find the quintessence of the most astonishing talent, born to consume itself. Lord Byron's life and poetry scarcely admit fair and balanced judgement. He has confessed his torments often enough; he has painted his anguish repeatedly, yet hardly a soul exists that feels for these unbearable sufferings! He is, truly, haunted by two women whose phantoms dog him everywhere, and who in this piece too fill the principal roles: one as Astarte; the other, bodiless and invisible, merely a voice. Here's the tale of the ghastly event that ended the first one's life. Lord Byron, young and bold, won a Florentine lady's heart; the husband discovered their affair and murdered his wife; but the assassin was found dead that same night in the street, and suspicion fell on no one. Lord Byron fled Florence, and these spectres have hounded him ever since.

This melodramatic incident gains credibility from his countless allusions to it in his poems, as when, turning his gaze inward, he applies to himself the fatal tale of the Spartan king. Pausanias, the Lacedaemonian general, won fame through his crucial victory at Plataea, but later lost his countrymen's trust through arrogance, stubbornness, and secret dealings with his nation's enemies. This man brought upon himself the cry of innocent blood that pursued him to his grave. For whilst commanding the allied Greek fleet on the Black Sea, he burned with violent desire for a Byzantine maiden; he finally secured her from her parents after lengthy resistance, and she was to be brought to him by night. She begged, from modesty, that the slave douse the lamp, and whilst groping in darkness, knocked it over. Pausanias, jolted

awake and fearing an assassin's attack, grabbed his sword and slew his lover. This ghastly vision thereafter haunted him constantly; her shade pursued him without respite, and he called futilely on gods and priests' exorcisms for relief.

The poet who plucks such a scene from antiquity to make his own and mine for tragic imagery must surely have a lacerated heart."

What might be vile in Goethe's lending his august name to these slanderous legends is somewhat softened by Byron's silence. Charged with murder, he never protested. He rather enjoyed letting these bloodstained fables cluster round his fame. The English mood, ever attuned to the tragic chord, cannot alone explain this trait in Byron. It carries a personal note in which nearly every poet of that moment would recognise the amplified echo of their own cry. The prevailing taste for rebellion among this generation alone accounts for it. At the heart of rebellion lies little of substance—chiefly the rhetoric of Rousseau.

His two propositions, one poisoning the other: pride in being born good has curdled into toxic vanity for man corrupted by society. There's Child-Harold's entire kit and Lara's vessel's whole freight. "We'd be good away from society: let's escape!" So they cry, and fancy they escape it, through space and time, fleeing homeland for the past. Hence that endless armada of poet-ships, sailing every direction towards every wilderness: the New World, Greece, Jerusalem, the Orient. Chateaubriand, Byron, Shelley, Lamartine, Gautier, Nerval, and more besides! I will grant this stampede contains something of genius's noble, natural instinct to shun inferior company. Lamartine wrote: "Every Poet creates within his soul a solitude to hear God." Yes, *within the soul*! But is it truly the soul's solitude Harold seeks? I suspect he flees himself, seeking instead some spectacle to distract him from the infinite yearning in his soul. And there's truth even in slander: the poet cannot help it if his cherished tales of woe remain merely tales. He is a man of action who settles for dreams only when action fails. In short, save for those cowardices of heart and flesh that would surely hold him back, he would prefer experiencing to narrating the crimes he recounts. At least he possesses this reality: private relish. This isn't about that ancient quarrel, long settled, whether one must be capable of the horrors one depicts to depict them well. We are examining a man, man before poet, crafting hideous pictures where evil wears beauty's masks: generosity, nobility, valour. This poet clearly savours these pictures; clearly too the poem's *conception* sprang from *sensations* he felt here or there, on Lake Geneva in a storm, in Venice during some tragicomic carnival scene. To devise and arrange the developments and crises of his poem or drama, he needed only to drive to their ultimate conclusions his imaginary yet genuine feelings, those feelings that convulsed his soul when he wondered, intoxicated by the fumes of his genius and the electricity of the tempest: "Given omnipotence, what would I do to my enemies, to the world?" He draped the answer to his rage in the fabric of his fancy and watched his heroes stride through his dream. Yes, the slanders contain truth: if not in deed, then in thought, Byron is that criminal from whom his age recoiled in horror.

Shakespeare and Rousseau, then: these are the forebears who inspired romanticism from the past[30]. In the present, it hails four poets: Byron and Walter Scott, Chateaubriand and Goethe.

In Byron, at least, the poetic sensibility could admire what was most vital and youthful in him: that tremendous outpouring of life which the poet of *Don Juan* revealed, though no more successfully than any translator might. By embracing Walter Scott, Romanticism betrayed its secret and true inclinations, showing where its natural sympathies would lead once it finally dropped its theatrical mask. Walter Scott reduces to 'good sense' all the feelings that stirred his age. Yet these feelings, once reduced

to good sense, or rather to mere 'commonplace', shrink back into their original void. A single quality survives in Walter Scott: he doesn't think, he imagines crudely and vulgarly, he turns history into absurd fable; he lacks ingenuity, good humour, and the power to terrify; his characters are neither ideal abstractions nor living beings, not even phantoms; he knows nothing of love or any passion[31]. But he has the picturesque, and that alone suffices to win universal acclaim. Scott brought not one fresh idea, yet he possessed a certain feeling for nature whose very falseness charmed his contemporaries. That turbulent landscape forming the backdrop to his trite drama must have particularly delighted the devotees of *Lara*, and Lara himself, who proclaimed Walter Scott the greatest poet of the age. The scenery eclipsed the drama and pleased as the natural and fitting stage for the drama of rebellion unfolding in every soul. But forgotten or remembered, the dramatic interest with which Scott contents himself and serves up to us remains thoroughly banal and bourgeois. His heroes are commonplace nobodies; their griefs, their joys, their ambitions, their 'circumstances' equally so. The glory Romanticism heaped upon such a poet augured its own dismal future. Through this glorification, Romanticism admitted how shallow was its appetite for the extraordinary, how this ideal, satisfied with mere façade, cheerfully tolerated the dreariest platitudes of mind and heart, how its hunger for novelty settled quite comfortably for the most threadbare conventions. Settled for them, indeed, with a telling preference that reveals much about the sincerity of all its rebellions. Romanticism happily delegates to trees and rocks the task of protesting against God: privately, it finds things perfectly acceptable as they are. So when the landscape loses its charm, when this scenery (lavished as it is, it won't stay fresh for long) grows stale, when we are thoroughly sick of these crumbling castles, these savage peaks, these wild trees that writhe their branches like accursed arms against a blood-soaked sky, when we have had quite enough, anywhere and everywhere, of the lyrical pirate ship, the picturesque medieval guardhouse, the dramatic ruined keep, what remains is the drama itself. And what is this drama? It is neither passion nor humanity. It is a childish tangle of violent yet hollow incidents, a pointless inflation to absurdity of ordinary feelings. It is, frankly, nothing whatsoever, and with this people will make do by refreshing it through two recipes, the trade secrets of two Schools: the *School of Good Sense* and the *School of the Thesis*[tn8]. Both will claim to accept life as it is, and both will falsify it. Both will lose all notion of Beauty and preach only usefulness. Good Sense (we should really say 'commonplace') will magnify life's ugliness, dreariness and banality. It will fashion from them a chimera more fantastical by far than Mohammed's Paradise. Having arranged its world, imaginary, thank heaven! (though it doesn't know it), so that one cannot bear to live there by habit, let alone endure the three hours of a play, it will solemnly declare, with a sincerity that provides splendid if unintentional comedy, that "things aren't so bad; that happiness is possible when one knows one's limits; that there's even cause for pride and merriment; that imagination is dispensable, a faculty one painlessly forgoes; that provided one lives without dreams or reason, without heart or mind, without character or temperament, one completes the great journey unperturbed."

Et si les choses vont de la bonne façon
Nous pourrons nous payer le luxe d'un garçon.
……
O père de famille, ô Poëte, je t'aime!

[And if things go the proper way
We can afford to have a boy.

.....
O paterfamilias, O Poet, how I adore thee!]

The Thesis, too, will start by magnifying the world's ugliness, but with far less optimism. It will insist that ugly isn't beautiful; that sad isn't cheerful; that everything around us is going wrong; that society is desperately sick; that we grievously wrong children by sorting them into legitimate and illegitimate according to their parents' conduct; that it's equally deplorable when a good man whose wife has indulged her whims remains devastated, and so forth, proposing remedies for all these ills. These approaches, as alien to art (despite the remarkable skill of clever practitioners) as the surveyor's chain and theodolite to da Vinci's palette and brush, or as the shouts of speculators and stockjobbers to the harmonies of the *Pastoral Symphony*, might at least have carried some social and political-economic weight. Unfortunately, all these society's physicians and bone-setters proved mere quacks whose remedies lacked even the potency of snake oil. So their work, to which I don't even attribute literary ambitions, will leave no mark on sociology. The other school, by contrast, somehow, no doubt through talent's unconquerable virtue, despite every effort to crush it, and perhaps too through the hidden irony of its dream, produced works that, while not beautiful, deserve respect. M. Émile Augier's name ranks among the most estimable in official French literature.

It seems paradoxical yet is true that these two dramatists, whose every tendency opposes the characteristic leanings within the Romantic movement, M. Augier and M. Dumas fils, have precisely laid bare the essence of those tendencies, the emptiness concealed beneath all that sumptuous drapery. They had supplanted profound classical psychology: when they fell away, nothing remained—that nothing from which *Good Sense* and the *Thesis* fashioned their dramas.

But alongside Byron and Scott, as I was saying, Romanticism also acclaimed Chateaubriand and Goethe.

In Chateaubriand, as in Goethe, we find two distinct personalities. The *Werther* is not written by the same man who gave us *Faust*. The *René* does not come from the pen that wrote *Le Génie du Christianisme*. We shall rediscover *Faust* and *Le Génie du Christianisme* at the wellspring of the great modern Synthesis. *Werther* and *René* belong to Romanticism. Are such distinctions mere caprice? Go back and read them anew. The moonstruck, mawkish lover of Charlotte proves as unbearable to modern sensibilities as they find compelling interest and profound satisfaction in mastering, to borrow Goethe's own phrase, all the mysteries he secreted within the Second *Faust*. The contrast is perhaps less stark between Chateaubriand's corresponding works. Admittedly, much of his magnum opus has aged, whilst certain passages in *René* remain perpetually exquisite. Perhaps we ought to have compared *René* not with *Le Génie* but with the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, whose prose still pulses with life and stands as the Master's most enduring monument to style and humanity. Yet it is in *Le Génie*, in *Les Martyrs* and in *Le Pèlerinage* that the mystical impulse resonates, and through this impulse Chateaubriand's spirit intuited what lay ahead. In *René* we find, still! only a rebel, both feebler and less tempestuous than his Byronic brethren. Even his response to nature rings more studied than genuine, and Chateaubriand himself confessed something worth noting: "Too absorbed by an artificial nature, we miss nature's true face." *Werther* is likewise a rebel, the feeblest, most dispiriting and most pernicious of the lot. Both books are steeped in despair: the tally has been made of how many readers took their own lives, and I have already observed that death is despair's inevitable terminus. Yet of these two towering geniuses, who together form the perfect Janus of the Modern Spirit, Romanticism grasped and cherished precisely

these two flawed works in which neither had fully articulated the revelations dwelling within them. Mark me well: I do not claim that only these two works by Goethe and Chateaubriand were *known*. Everything they uttered echoed far and wide, achieving fame. At the dawn of the century, they stand as deities who exact reverence and confound the critics. But it was through these two works above all that they wielded their tremendous influence upon their immediate age: the rest spoke to posterity. When contemporaries read *Faust*, they do so without comprehension and, like Byron (who knew only the First *Faust*), merely to quarry material for drama. Should they press further, they soon falter, and if they follow Goethe to Helen's feet, they stand transfixed by pagan beauty, instantly embrace its symbol (limited though it is), mimic it, adopt it as their ideal, never suspecting that for Goethe this was but one step in his sublime ascent towards Beautiful Truth. They never guess that *Goethe was an initiate*. They remain ignorant of the distant beacon guiding his universal quest, of the burning metaphysical and scientific faith that anchors this vast tapestry of Legends, *Faust*. Pronouncements such as these remained utterly opaque to them:

"Ah! if only we understood our brain, its connections with Uranus, the myriad threads criss-crossing within it along which thought darts to and fro! The lightning-flash of thought! Yet we glimpse it only as it strikes! Man is NATURE'S FIRST DIALOGUE WITH GOD. I cannot doubt that this dialogue must continue on another sphere, more sublime, more profound, more comprehensible. For now, we lack a thousand forms of knowledge. First comes self-knowledge, then follow the others… Perhaps knowledge must remain fragmentary on a planet which, thrown off course in its solar orbit, renders all reflection incomplete, requiring faith to supply what's missing… Where science suffices, faith becomes redundant; but where science falters, let us not presume to contest faith's sovereign claims. Beyond this principle, that science and faith exist not to negate but to complete one another, lies only error and confusion…"

Whether Goethe articulates these profound meditations directly, with that majestic simplicity, or entrusts them to Faust, the Romantics remain deaf to his voice. They cherry-pick: *Faust* holds their attention only whilst Marguerite shares the stage; they desert him when she exits.

Another selection, still more revealing of which influences the Romantics could absorb and which surpassed their grasp, is their preference for Byron over Shelley. This staggering injustice requires a moment's pause to remember that Byron and Shelley were exact contemporaries, intimate friends, their works composed in the same years. Why did Byron achieve instant celebrity whilst Shelley[32], at least in France, remained virtually unknown until a decade ago? Simply because Shelley belonged to his age neither in his cast of mind nor in his mode of expression. Like Pascal, from whom he seems worlds apart, Shelley is our contemporary. Not that his work lacks flaws. I mean, not that it perfectly aligns with our present convictions. But his very errors spring from partial truths, from the interplay of evolving verities. His antipathy to religion, broadly speaking, strikes a rather theatrical note that jars: "O religion! fertile monster that stocks the earth with demons, hell with men and heaven with slaves!" Yet in his day, such antipathy had its enlightened aspect, for society's worst afflictions indeed stemmed from the crushing strictures imposed by Christianity in its death throes. His rhetoric overstates and rather undermines his actual position, which remains sound and salutary insofar as it voices the pressing need for spiritual liberation. Moreover, Shelley, unlike those poets besotted with grand and thunderous retreats, understands the only solitude worth having, that of the soul. Such phrases recur throughout his verse: "…until there dawned within my soul the consciousness of my solitude." "…He felt his solitude return." Finally, Shelley stands at the threshold of those uncharted realms of thought where glimmers the still-nebulous vision of mysterious beliefs, humanity's ancient yet utterly modern faith. He

senses the vitality in all things: "I have heard kindly sounds emerge from many a tongue not human." He trusts in correspondences and anticipates Swedenborg: "O blessed earth, heaven made real!" He proclaims a gospel of human dignity, self-sufficient and declaring that contemplation of eternal rewards and punishments adds nothing to our inherent nobility: "Within their own hearts the good shall always find that fire of hope which made them great…"

All this speaks to our present moment, all this rests upon the sole desire man discovers when he searches his soul: the desire for happiness. Shelley eludes the Romantics[33] chiefly in this: he dreams of happiness rather than condemning himself to barren contemplation of his own spectre reflected in the glass of his own wretchedness:

Tum quoque se, postquam est inferna sede receptus, in Stygia spectabat aqua.

[Then, after he had been received into the Underworld, he even began to gaze into the Stygian pool.][tn9]

The Romantics never gazed into their own souls. We need only recall the stock characters they created, already such strangers to us! I'm not speaking of Goethe's or Byron's creations. I mean the heroes of Hugo's dramas and novels: Hernani, Doña Sol, Marion Delorme, Triboulet, and the rest; Quasimodo, Esmeralda, Jean Valjean; I mean Vigny's Chatterton, Dumas's Antony, Gautier's Fortunio, Musset's Don Paez and Rolla… Their unworldly grace has been praised to the skies. Their speeches are often ravishing, their gestures nearly always as bewitching as their costumes are magnificent. But Banville could never imagine they drew their costumes from their souls, for they never possessed any! I hear their words and see their gestures, yet it galls me that thought never preceded speech, that no heartbeat governs their movements.

Romanticism *lacked self-awareness*: there's its sharpest and truest characteristic. Hence its predilection for dramatic form, where poets most readily mask the bankruptcy of their ideas. I will say it once more: Romanticism is a wayward childhood, prone to malice and melancholy, punctuated by fits of mirth and innocence.

We have fallen too much into the habit of embodying it in Victor Hugo. By some unfathomable marvel, poets flocked to him as to an idol rather than a chief, poets whom posterity deems had every bit as much right to lead. Yet all rendered tribute to his genius, all were only too pleased to let him harvest the crop they had sown. Victor Hugo commanded prodigious imaginative and verbal powers, yet he utterly lacked any inner compass of his own. That's why he could follow every direction with equal ease. His genius accommodated everything, without preference, without those preferences that confine but also anchor a temperament. Diderot, who enjoyed occasional flashes of good sense despite himself and his age, remarked: "One should choose one's ground and hold to it." Victor Hugo chose every ground and abandoned them all. A hundred poets inhabit him who together fail to make one. His contemporaries conspired to let him foster the illusion of being the sovereign of poetry. But this very concept of poetic sovereignty is nonsense. There's neither first nor second in Art; to be is to stand alone, since *being* consists in saying what no other knows how to say. Geniuses are like women: they admit no ranking. Victor Hugo lays claim to a rank that cannot exist. His originality lies in imitating everyone. He fancied himself foremost in everything? He came second in nearly all. He debuts with *Odes* that Lefranc de Pompignan might have penned and proceeds by taking from every hand whilst discovering nothing for himself. He apes Shakespeare, Chateaubriand, Byron, Lamartine, Alfred de Vigny, Théophile Gautier, Leconte de l'Isle. Admittedly, he imitates with genius; he possesses the

originality of greater abundance than his models; yet he also suffers from slackening every mechanism he handles. No one surpasses his eloquence, but eloquence becomes mere bombast when divorced from firm convictions. What convictions does Hugo hold? He adores Voltaire! He will brazenly yoke that name to Christ's in a single breath! His philosophical verses amount to catalogues of proper nouns. True, his staggering defects bring staggering virtues in their train. That boldness which permits him to hazard his phrase-making gift at every turn has brought him to the threshold of every insight. Yet his work remains impersonal and bloated: hollow.

Such claims will strike some as reckless: they aren't made lightly. They will seem to slight genius: they spring from respect for it. Victor Hugo tyrannised his epoch. He mustn't tyrannise posterity. We must cease believing he realised everything. We must accord him his rightful station as a wondrous craftsman and a poet of the second order.

His contemporaries, in their idolatry, were perhaps more shrewd than humble. They virtually deputised him to bear that hallowed title, the title of Poet, thereby rendering through another the religious homage they couldn't render in themselves, homage necessary to command the world's reverence. Yet one poet cast off the shackles of Hugo-worship[34]. The most perceptive of them all; the sole one to acknowledge being a child amongst all these children with their tragic or pedantic airs, and the sole one haunted by remorse at not being a man. The most perceptive and insouciant of the Romantics, the most joyous, yet also he who raised the most harrowing cries. Musset's schoolboy jibes at Hugo are well known. These pranks concealed profound insight. I have no wish to inflate Musset's importance. Greater shares exist than his, though none more pristine. Like his entire generation, he fell prey to Voltaire and Rousseau, yet he alone grasps the source of his malady, and he alone divines the cure, though lacking the fortitude to embrace it. That cure is Poetry's sincere return, stripped of literary posturing, to the mystical union of religious and scientific understanding. The purity of Musset resides in the *human* authenticity of his anguish. Amongst the Romantics proper, only this child still discerns human truth beyond the painted masks that leer around him. If they recognise their descent from a century of abomination, deceit, and ennui, they glory in it, they hymn Voltaire. Musset harbours the victim's loathing for his murderer. He spits at him: "Rejoice, for your spawn are born!" And for these creatures as for himself, alas! he reserves only scorn. He knows them to be, as he is himself, unfit to cherish Truth; yet how this impotence torments him, how revolted he is at being merely what he is! He recognises the hour as poisonous, yearns to flee or conquer it. But how feeble!… he capitulates beforehand. Sickened by Truth as much as by his era and his soul, he settles for drifting through life in utter ignorance. Without pride (what cause for pride?), he owns himself *a child of the century*, and this admission betrays uncanny acuity. *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* isn't, like *Werther*, *René*, or *Adolphe*, passion's indulgence in its own negation; it's the dignified torment of a soul conscious of the chasm between its yearnings and its powers. *Werther*, *René*, *Adolphe* preach cowardice. The *Confession* merely mirrors anguish and strikes us (an aspect even Musset's devotees have overlooked) as the masterwork of a piercing and doleful moralist. Musset never departed from the moment and emotions of his *Confession*, a desolating moment, emotions of helplessness: the awareness of despair. And Musset, who shares many failings and every virtue of the French spirit, proved as logical as that spirit. Powerless to win self-respect through noble exertion, he drew no comfort from self-loathing, and despair drove him to gradual self-destruction. I honour this suicide infinitely more than Hugo's stately career and venerable twilight. Had Musset, like Hugo, found satisfaction in any counterfeit of Truth, or had he, like Goethe, mustered the valour to probe reality's depths, he would have embraced life's duration: he

possessed neither such dishonesty nor such courage. His memory lingers, melancholy and enchanting. We cherish his wild merriment all the more knowing it must dissolve into tears, that his songs must expire in this plaint:

Le seul bien qui me reste au monde
C'est d'avoir quelquefois pleuré.

[The sole blessing left me in this world
Is having sometimes wept.]

In him alone we cherish that Middle Ages, every bit as mythical and spurious as Hugo's, yet which refuses to take itself seriously and seems to revel and delight in its own fantastic nature. We readily forgive those romantic flourishes of the *Premières Poésies*, those liberties with Rhythm and Rhyme. We remember that beneath these whims throbs, despite all, an urgent and vital feeling, a burning hunger to understand and love. This Middle Ages of the Poems, Tales, and Comedies, as capricious as Fantasio himself, remains nonetheless the Middle Ages of those monks whom Rolla envies their capacity for love:

C'est un profond amour qu'au fond de vos calices
Vous buviez à plein cœur, moines mystérieux:
La tête du Sauveur errait sur vos cilices…
Vous aimiez ardemment, ah! vous étiez heureux.

['Twas a profound devotion from your chalice-depths
You drank with all your heart, mysterious brothers:
The Saviour's visage haunted your hair shirts…
You loved with ardour—ah! you knew true happiness.]

And Fantasio himself, Lorenzaccio too, and every character in those exquisite *Proverbes*, they are all Don Juan, the Don Juan of *Namouna*'s miraculous lines…

Musset and Lamartine have far better claim than Hugo to represent Romanticism at its finest[35]. Hugo thought he had discovered Antithesis: did he not know that it forms the very essence of all art and all vital action? Love, Verse, Thought itself, these are antitheses; telling us so teaches us nothing. It's a simple truth the Classics already grasped but had the wisdom not to belabour, preferring to reconcile extremes in divine unity rather than perpetuate their ancient quarrel. Yet Hugo chooses this latter path, thinking it novel, and in this he does innovate: against Humanity and Wisdom alike. Lamartine and Musset keep their heads, never severing the bonds of tradition. Lamartine has no love for Rousseau, yet springs from his lineage, and has read Chateaubriand who read Bossuet. Musset loathes Voltaire and Rousseau, yet inherits from them, and has read Marivaux who read Molière. Both, however, remain children. We have established Musset's temperament: a feverish twenty-year-old child, capable of mirth, yet melancholy at heart. Lamartine shares his youth but as a serene and cheerful child. Our generation treats him shabbily, though not without reason. Schooled by profound and learned Masters, magnificent and sombre, devoted to concentrated, singular Beauties that command themselves, trained in every exacting refinement of craft whilst conversant with the rigorous principles of Science (from which springs the loveliest yet most austere Dream), we are poorly equipped to appreciate Lamartine's magnificent but unrestrained lyricism, his luminous and princely imagination, natural and unguarded,

his genius blissfully ignorant of technique and all learnable things. We would judge more fairly with better memories, recalling the wretched state of French Poetry before Lamartine found his voice. It lay wordless and unfeeling, without rhythm or rhyme, a dead, nameless thing, its ideal lost. Lamartine restored that ideal, breathed life back into it, gave it scope, harmony, amplitude; he provided the expansion Baudelaire needed for his concentration. Our ungrateful generation should remember: it owes Lamartine the very possibility of all subsequent Poets. From him directly it inherits, despite careless passages that court oblivion, verses of incomparable lyricism that still resonate in every cultivated memory.

Quand le souffle divin qui flotte sur le monde
S'arrête sur mon âme ouverte au moindre vent,
Et la fait tout à coup frissonner comme une onde
Où le cygne s'abat dans un cercle mouvant!

Quand d'un ciel de printemps l'aurore qui ruisselle
Se brise et rejaillit en gerbes de chaleur,
Que chaque atome d'air roule son étincelle,
Et que tout sous mes pas devient lumière ou fleur!

Quand tout chante ou gazouille, ou roucoule ou bourdonne,
Que d'immortalité tout semble se nourrir,
Et que l'homme, ébloui de cet air qui rayonne,
Croit qu'un jour si vivant ne pourra plus mourir!

Jéhova ! Jéhova ! ton nom seul me soulage!
Il est le seul écho qui réponde à mon coeur!
Ou plutôt ces élans, ces transports, sans langage,
Sont eux-mêmes un écho de ta propre grandeur!

[When the divine breath that drifts across the world
Alights upon my soul, open to every breeze,
And sets it trembling like a pond
Where swans descend in rippling rings;

When springtime's dawn comes streaming from the sky,
Breaking and splashing up in sheaves of warmth,
When every mote of air spins its own spark
And all beneath my feet turns light or flower;

When everything sings, warbles, coos or hums,
When all creation seems to feed on deathlessness
And man, bedazzled by this radiant air,
Believes so vital a day shall never die,

Jehovah, Jehovah, thy name alone sustains me!

It is the sole echo that speaks to my heart:
Or rather these surges, these wordless raptures
Are themselves the echo of thy very grandeur…]

[Alphonse de Lamartine, *Le cri de l'âme*]

A few will hear what I have to say. Though Alfred de Vigny and Baudelaire have walked among us, Lamartine remains, among our illustrious dead, our sole true Poet, the only name that conjures an entire realm of enchantment, nobility, reverie, and Beauty. He alone escapes that threefold affliction of the French temperament: the didactic, the critical, and the ironic. The Poet escapes, if not the man. For there existed a national, superannuated Lamartine who admitted to admiring Ponsard, Delavigne, and Béranger, and this counterfeit Lamartine earned his punishment: the devotion of elderly spinsters. Though he may have had a hand in *Jocelyn*, he knew nothing of the *Méditations*, the *Harmonies*, *La Chute d'un Ange*, or *Raphaël*. Lamartine recognised this duality. Here is his defence: "A few stumbling, often wayward steps along an endless path: the same portion falls to all who seek truth or beauty. Strength, years, leisure all desert us. A poet's days are brief, even in the longest human span." Yet in his season of song, he stood more conspicuously than any other exempt from inherited mediocrity. He possessed the understanding of Nature in festival. Round his spirit turned a mystical garden, natural paradise itself. Half-veiled, half-languishing with a smile, the languor and smile of self-absorbed sensuality, a woman glides through, her step so harmonious the garden falls under her spell. She harbours no mystery. She is neither the *marshalled host* nor the *ailing child*. She radiates light, illuminating everything, a living lightning that lends this admiring nature, whose graceful incarnation she is, her own reflected charm, even the generosity of her greeting. For this garden of gentle dreams holds no terrors, though a cross does stand there, wreathed in flowers. Its shadow brings only refreshing coolness, no dread. This cross casts no pall over this inviting, loving nature with its ever-open embrace, and in this atmosphere of sensuous piety, the Poet prays like one chosen. He prays toward the cross, yet sees it mainly reflected in Elvira's eyes: a Beatrice who embodies Paradise itself, and it's divinity realised in human form he worships. One day[36] he will admit it: the garden trees and flowering cross will vanish, woman will emerge from her veils and, multiplying, leave the poet's vision dazzled by a palace of splendid female forms. Beyond the luminous Garden stretches the dismal City. Lamartine won't venture there. He would rather await death in the Garden…

A heart untroubled by right or wrong. Perhaps only a work of unsparing psychology like *Adolphe* might slip past this prohibition. That novel hardly qualifies as romantic, save for certain emotional excesses verging on sentimentality, where Benjamin Constant's usually sharp analysis dulls, and for those indulgences in despair that mark their era. Better to rank Constant beneath Stendhal among the forerunners of the psychological novel, where external drama barely exists and everything hinges on interior revelation. Drama, by contrast, dominates Sand, Sandeau, and all the novelists through to Mérimée. This last, the dusk-lit trace of Romantic yearning, presents a curious case. He stands at the crossroads where opposing influences converge, clash, struggle, merge, undermine and support one another. Mérimée champions, in spirit and sensibility, an art of scenic intricacy and complication. He is the consummate man of letters, even the courtier-man-of-letters. Yet he senses hostile winds, something new emerging, and stands guard. Psychology returns to favour: Mérimée studies it, grudgingly but thoroughly. Critics charge the last disciples of Lamartine and Hugo with

excessive abandon, with letting themselves go. Mérimée keeps himself in check. He cultivates an impeccable bearing, a faultless prose. He strikes no false note in the ranks of flawless stylists. Perhaps there's irony here: one expects it from the hoaxer of *La Guzla*. But the pose never slips. Scientific influence has even touched him. When occasion demands, he will invoke a physical cause. He also grasps life's value in art and conjures quite a convincing illusion of it. *Colomba* and *Carmen* aren't mere conventions, nor are their landscapes… What then relegates these thoroughly enjoyable books to yesterday? What did Mérimée need to become a Poet? Where does he fall short? His shortcoming is an excess of intelligence. Blessed with excellent memory and keen discrimination, he catalogues all his predecessors' virtues and vices, striving to embrace the former whilst avoiding the latter. His ear, too, is finely tuned, distinguishing truth from falsehood in what he hears. But he intuits nothing. He is a spectator who takes to the stage and performs admirably, without genius. A witness, not a hero. Horribly dry and cold. What did he lack? Heart. His work reeks of the past precisely through its relative perfection. Some flaws are worth having, creation's necessary dross: Mérimée lacks them because he doesn't create. He leaves us the example and warning of a flawless work worth nothing.

No conscience and, conclusive evidence, no criticism[37]. I cannot recognise as literary or aesthetic criticism Jules Janin's causeries, the arid dissertations of Planche, or the brilliant, entertaining excursions of Gautier or Paul de Saint-Victor on works of literature and art. Their imagination almost always speaks, their reason almost never.

Yet when Romanticism arrived, Criticism had already been born. We find it in Cousin's works on the seventeenth century, in Villemain's on the eighteenth, but only as historical inquiry, forever looking backward. Of Art's present evolution, of where its currents tend and what they crystallise from the living moment, neither Cousin nor Villemain knows, or at any rate tells us, a thing. For someone to stammer forth the philosophy of art as it seethes and ferments in our own day, we must await Sainte-Beuve. But Sainte-Beuve is no Romantic. Even *Joseph Delorme*, his only book that seems to march with the movement of 1830, teems with elements understood only in 1880, elements derided when they first appeared. At all events, *Les Pensées d'août* and *Volupté* stand in no danger of confusion with the period's novels and heroic verse. Moreover, Sainte-Beuve himself, as Émile Hennequin[38] has acutely noted, remains something other than the modern Critic, such as we recognise in M. Taine, and such as we recognised, alas, in Émile Hennequin himself. Sainte-Beuve never grapples with "the relationship between author and work, nor that between authors and the society they inhabit, those delicate and fertile questions which M. Taine had the distinction of first discerning." Sainte-Beuve lacked both scientific grounding and comprehensive vision; he caught only glimpses.

When all is said and done, the Romantic achievement remains considerable. "Romantic," declares M. de Banville, "romantic in the word's true sense: cruel yet ironic, poetic yet farcical, wedding laughter to horror, denial to rapture, riven with antagonisms, grandeur, madness, love, sublime aspirations and absurdity, like Life itself." Here M. de Banville plays the part of that dramatic critic who reviewed plays not as they were but as they should and could have been. What M. de Banville has defined is not Romanticism but Art perfected: he has defined Shakespeare. Romanticism discovered the outer world, attended to the beauty of surfaces, set Art in motion, and found feeling where its predecessors had found only thought. So much for its substance. As to form, it shook the ancient language awake and taught it to move like a living thing. It slew the periphrasis. It stripped the classical verse of its cerements and breathed life into it through precision wedded to liberty, through reverence

for rhyme and the freedom of enjambment. It pursued the exact word, a chimera perhaps, but a productive one. It forged a sculptural prose, whose masterwork remains that elusive *Gaspard de la Nuit* of Aloysius Bertrand.

Sensation Alone

How came it that modern man, scarcely out of childhood, found himself already so old? For surely one must be old to take such exclusive interest in one's sensations, to observe and dissect them, to pursue them through their causes, accidents and effects. — Modern man aged himself by reaction. Once the Romantic spirit had sung itself hoarse, he was stricken with shame. He felt compelled to seize upon something solid, to fathom the truth of matters about which he had discoursed so airily in utter ignorance. — This bedrock of human existence he believed he had discovered in the physical laws of life and forthwith entered the laboratory and the anatomy theatre. — What a volte-face! Only yesterday the talk was all of cloak and dagger, of towering passions and heinous crimes, with everyone setting forth to seek adventure and exotic vistas. Today we keep to our hearths, speak only of trifling natural phenomena, and confine ourselves, by choice, within the bounds of the familiar. Once we yearned for grandeur, for the sublime, even the colossal; now the infinitesimal holds us in its thrall, though moderately so. We were far-sighted and mad; now we are myopic and sane.

Mark well that the Naturalist movement is quintessentially French—wholly unlike Romanticism. The Classical movement was likewise French, albeit with borrowings from antiquity and roots reaching deep into the Middle Ages. Naturalism springs unbidden from our native soil. What secured its triumph, truth be told, was that beneath its mask of cold brutality it pandered to bourgeois common sense by trafficking only in the solid and palpable. Those sweeping Romantic gestures were Spanish, English, German. A tidy example presented by the Naturalist suits our blinkered vision and has this further merit: one might almost mistake it (were one not to scrutinise too closely, for nothing is more dismal and pedantic at bottom) for a jest in the old Gallic vein, though scarcely in the French.

Romanticism took Shakespeare for its lodestar and turned to Goethe's works. Naturalism swears by Balzac and Claude Bernard.

This last name betrays both the proximate source and the essential character of the movement. — It rides the tide of scientific physiology and confines itself, quite *deliberately*, to explaining life's mysteries through the laws of physical phenomena. Deliberately, I insist, for there is something forced and calculated here, a reaction against recent flights of fancy, a lamentable resolve to banish all idealism, all pursuit of Beauty, all human agency, and to reduce the teeming variety of passionate experience—whether personal or social—to a handful of iron necessities.

Herein lies the principal quality found in Naturalism: it belittles, contracts, *dwarfs* both man and nature. As for the Almighty, He goes quite unmentioned, and the Naturalists pronounce the word "Mystic" only with sardonic relish—as a term of abuse.

Let this not pass unnoticed! They champion Balzac, they lionise Flaubert, yet how capriciously they cherry-pick from these Masters' œuvres!—more capriciously still than the Romantics with Goethe. What becomes of Balzac's *Œuvres Philosophiques*? *Louis Lambert*—how does it fare? What of *Séraphîta*[39]*?* They swoon before *Madame Bovary* and *Un cœur simple*. *L'Education sentimentale* pleases them rather less, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* less again, whilst *Salammbô*, *La Tentation* and the two remaining *Contes* represent "the lesser portion of Flaubert's achievement."

The Naturalist movement need not detain us as long as its forerunners. Not that it lacks definition, but rather that it lacks staying power. Think of it as the modern spirit's sop to conscience, taking on scientific ballast before attempting the great synthesis, nothing more. One need only observe the telling fact that it has failed to produce a single poet—a poet in verse, I mean. Several have aspired to become *the* Naturalist bard whom M. Zola so eagerly awaited. M. Zola himself has versified: the results are Romantic; M. Guy de Maupassant has versified: the results are execrable; M. Daudet has versified: ...! One poet alone seemed to warrant Naturalist approval, yet M. François Coppée springs from Parnassian stock. He is an intimist and modernist who is no more Naturalist than was Gautier.

A further symptom—were one needed—that the wind has gone out of Naturalism is the endless train of camp-followers it already trails in its wake—a source of shame it nonetheless retains, since at least they swell the ranks. Naturalism already pants for breath (to reverse the metaphor) though barely thirty years of age! Inevitably so. Nothing is simpler than churning out novels to this prescription, and every hack has rushed to try. Small wonder we soon found ourselves mired in sheer pornography. Here neither talent nor observation obtains, only filth—and the dreariness thereof! This muck, moreover, clings to the movement's luminaries. They bear responsibility, having wilfully lowered and narrowed their sights. They outlawed imagination—in theory—whilst prepared to deploy it as needed, witness M. Zola, who remains as much a Romantic as a Naturalist. But the acolytes took their mentors at their word. The order of the day was to invent nothing, to bring no idealistic preconceptions to studying nature, to shrink from nothing, indeed, to grub by preference in the depths and dregs, for therein "lies the pearl." There they have sought it; I do believe some wretches seek it still.

Yet naturalistic ambitions extend far beyond what I have suggested, and I no doubt do it a disservice by confining it to Sensation alone. It claims to see something more in Balzac, and the formula, *A corner of nature seen through a temperament*, encompasses the whole of life. But let's set Balzac aside for now: he is the founding father. There is indeed more than sensation in his work, for he contains everything. Better to examine Flaubert: *Madame Bovary* is undeniably a work of Naturalism. What principally sets this novel apart from those of Sand, Sandeau, Alphonse Karr and the rest? Three defining features: the novelist steps back from his material, never once intruding in his own person—herein lies objectivity; nothing strains credulity, everything flows from Emma's temperament—in this we see logic; Emma's temperament is wholly physical, wholly sensual, and the tale of her affairs amounts to nothing more than a chronicle of sensations—here is a work of sensation, of physiology, and everything in the book follows this same sensational, physiological pattern.

To capture a George Sand character, André, let's say, we would call him weak-willed, a dreamer, groping for nebulous terms of moral import. To capture a Victor Hugo character, Jean Valjean, we would reach for equally nebulous terms of social import, calling him an honest convict, and so forth. With André and Jean Valjean we register only gesture, dress, bearing, and must summon up their dialogue to fix them in memory. But to capture Charles Bovary and his wife, we could only say: here is a lymphatic constitution, there is a hysteric, and this without recalling a word they have spoken, for we *see* their faces: the husband's pallor and lifeless eyes, his tentative gait; his wife's different pallor, feverish and warm, her gleaming eyes, that sensual mouth, her rapid movements, hands that swiftly clasp and unclasp... To say nothing of the poisoning! We have witnessed death in classical theatre: souls wafting away. In Romantic works, it's a marionette forever breaking apart, for any reason, for no reason, to open or close the scene, always with a graceful flourish. But Emma! She dies as we all must die, when nothing remains but the flickering life of the senses, when consciousness has drawn its veil, when the

eyes betray only animal suffering, the organism, racked with physical despair as it convulses before subsiding into permanent stillness. Emma has scarcely possessed a soul; she can lose only the life she has had; yet reading this poisoning scene infects us with its nausea.

What have we found, then, in *Madame Bovary*? An objective and logical work—so much for the technique; a sensational and physiological work—here we have the substance. Is this exceptional? But what else do we find in those other novels the School acknowledges as naturalist? What do we find perpetually, predominantly, perhaps exclusively? How do the characters strike us in *Germinie Lacerteux*, *Madame Gervaisais*, *Le Ventre de Paris*, *L'Assommoir*, *Nana*, in *Les Sœurs Vatard*, *Boule-de-suif*, *Une Belle Journée*, in *Le Nommé Perreux*? What drives them to act? What occupies their thoughts? What inner life do they possess? They possess none, they think of nothing. Their motives spring from bile or nerves. They harbour no dreams, know no joy. They are melancholy, achingly melancholy—though theirs is a melancholy of the flesh only. We track them with our gaze, these pallid or florid faces, wracked by disease, neurosis or anaemia, goaded by hunger, drink, lust, bound together or driven apart by shared or conflicting appetites—figures, the lot of them, crushed beneath the Doom of physical corruption or hereditary madness.

Doom! The Naturalists have resurrected Doom, made blacker yet, more merciless, more hideous, more oppressive than the ancient variety, though lacking its grandeur and beauty. Orestes at least can cherish the consoling delusion that he might outrun the Eumenides, might put leagues between himself and them; he flees to Apollo's sanctuary crying for refuge, and the god shields him from the Furies. But Germinie Lacerteux, Coupeau—how can they escape their Furies? The Furies dwell within! Their names are Drunkenness and Hysteria; they rage through the blood, they seize upon the nerves. This parallel between ancient and modern doom presses itself upon us so insistently that the new school's most official representative (though his standing derives more, perhaps, from self-appointment than peer recognition, and rests chiefly on his *promotional* genius, the most prodigious this century has witnessed since Victor Hugo) himself invokes it in one of his most celebrated novels. The chosen theme is incest[40]. M. Zola, never lacking in imagination, has ventured every boldness here. His book courts perilous comparisons: its title recalls Chateaubriand, its subject echoes *Phèdre*. For all its schematic quality, *La Curée* displays remarkable gifts. It may well be its author's finest achievement and certainly ranks among those works deemed distinguished in the period. M. Zola's shortcomings, when measured against the illustrious predecessors he challenges, ought nevertheless to be offset by his considerable advantage: he knows their mistakes, which stem primarily from their artistic creeds, and treating the same material, might have sidestepped them. Yet he has not!

Phèdre possesses neither the semblance of external life nor sensual existence. She has only impassioned thoughts, or rather, she *is* only a soul locked in combat with Passion. *René* perhaps captures something of Passion's ideal reality, but lacks sensual life, possessing little beyond motion and sentiment. *Renée*, however, knows nothing whatsoever of this ideal reality. She has no soul, and if she preserves some vestige of gesture and outward feeling, it's only because the Naturalists have been reading the Romantics. Her sole authentic life, however, resides in her sensations. She is a well-bred animal. I overstated the failings of Racine when I claimed he had silenced Phèdre's senses and emotions. I had forgotten that sublime verse:

Oh! que ne suis-je assise à l'ombre des forêts!

[Oh! why am I not seated in the forest shade!]

Racine—and Chateaubriand likewise—understand nature's sway over lovers' spirits. They grasp that truth a lesser though delightful poet would later articulate: "a landscape is a state of soul[41]." M. Zola, if he suspects as much, betrays no sign. Time and again he finds himself abstracting sensation from the character experiencing it, the better to dissect it, and when he realises this threatens his character's overall coherence, he hurriedly plunges them—in thoroughly Romantic fashion—into action. *René* may ring falser, concerning itself more with effects than causes; yet *Phèdre* contains more truth than *Renée*, for psychological causes run deeper and matter more than physiological ones.

The Naturalists vehemently insist otherwise, and for these myopes, man amounts to nothing but his organs. In their sincere moments, they recoil from their own conclusions with a secret revulsion that betrays the reassertion of that Spirit which dwells within and resists all handling. "Can the physical being constitute the man?" they ask, "And are our moral and spiritual faculties — a thought most wretched! — merely the workings of some organ in its diseased condition[42]?" Even within what they would like to consider the purely physical realm, they occasionally detect phenomena that defy physical explanation, like that "atmosphere of the June Days of 1848 that sent all Bicêtre's madmen into frenzy[43]," and countless other impalpable, subterranean sympathies that inevitably elude their analysis. Woman especially, with her ingeniously subtle complexities, her seeming illogic, the unpredictable, the sudden recoil of her hidden mechanisms, the inseparable tangle of her virtues and vices, the meanness in her nobility, the tenderness in her cruelty, the harsh undertones of her mercy—woman in all her femininity toys with naturalist analysis and invariably defeats it. Four or five lines of Racine reveal more on this score than all the latest school's novels combined. Even M. de Goncourt—surely the most refined, most acute, and best-informed precisely on this feminine enigma—admits his inadequacy: "Woman cannot be read as man is read; she is wrapped, sealed, often opaque to herself." Yet most proceed with disturbing confidence. Something farcical lurks within. Has Science truly reached such categorical, such irrevocable conclusions that one may answer every *why*—every last one—with a smug "Here is your *because*"?

Madame Bovary and *Germinie Lacerteux* alone might have sufficed to vindicate the naturalist formula, had it not been required to capture something beyond individual sensations, namely, the sensations of society itself.

Here lay the Naturalists' most crucial undertaking, and here they failed most spectacularly. Yet they seem to have grasped precisely what they were after. Take Zola, for instance. He repeatedly sets himself the express aim of depicting the masses: the throng in the streets, the workshop floor, the department store, the mining folk. His temperament positively drives him there, for in such territory he is unlikely to stumble upon those individual problems—those deep, mysterious tangles—which he dismisses as already solved, holding psychology in a contempt one can only find amusing. When he ventures down this path, he generally succeeds: nobody has ever matched his gift for choreographing crowds. Here, indeed, he has touched greatness. Small wonder: crowds are pure physicality when they *act* as one; thought reaches them, in the heat of action, only as raw sensation and fleeting image; they feel the crush of bodies, the mounting heat their very numbers generate; they dissolve the individual into one voice amongst a hundred thousand; they become a synthesis of churning impressions. The gift that the naturalist formula has for capturing the physical, wedded to Zola's lingering Romantic inheritance, thus equipped him supremely to become the crowds' most brilliant chronicler. Yet beneath the social sensation—beneath that climactic roar and gesture stirred by the multitude—lies something

else entirely. That explosive moment merely marks the final convulsion of a crisis. What matters more than the crisis is its gestation: the slow, hidden crystallisation of collective *thought*, the secret yet potent life of the *people's soul*. This life Zola never captured, nor could any Naturalist capture it, for it demands a synthesis of the three literary modes we have traced: Classical passion, Romantic sentiment, and Naturalist sensation[44].

Of these three wellsprings, Naturalism most glaringly lacks the first. Let me be precise: it cannot *seemingly* do without moral beings; it must present us with characters intelligent or thick, pure or dissolute, honest or false, proud or humble, and so on; yet neither its true interest nor its governing perspective holds steady in this moral and psychological realm. For the Naturalist, thought carries no essential weight in human action: he records and renders only material consequences.

He works in pictures, not photographs—or, in his preferred term, he is "objective."

This lofty claim to aesthetic *objectivity* amounts to a fleeting delusion. If the term simply meant that writers should never "editorialise" about their subject matter, fair enough—though what of it? Masterworks by Balzac and Barbey d'Aurevilly suffer from the author's intrusions, appearing like some faceless dramatis persona or Greek Chorus. But if it meant to ban writers from colouring the passions and landscapes they evoke with the hues of their own souls, that's pure nonsense. The Naturalists have striven, wherever possible, to accomplish this nonsense, inventing what we call the "descriptive style." Take a landscape. Naturalist description means rendering it in prose exactly *as everyone sees it*, in its "external truth." These last two words share only one flaw—they cannot coexist. Art knows no external truth. The photographic surface of things, besides being factually false, merely serves as raw material for art; art proper begins where surfaces end, in what lies beyond them, and that beyond dwells in that soul which moves the artist. What art consists in is the significance Corot and Cazin extract from landscape, following certain shared principles of how light behaves, principles they nonetheless apply with sovereign freedom, according to their distinct sensibilities. Should Corot and Cazin "copy" the same landscape, their versions won't resemble each other, nor will either much resemble the photograph. Strictly speaking, *exact* description is impossible. Not only do no two pairs of eyes see identically, but faithful reproduction of nature would be both sinful and pointless: sinful because it would duplicate creation, pointless because nature already exists, and Art seeks only the New, the beyond, the heightened. The only novelty lies in the artist's response, his personal encounter with the universe. Art is therefore fundamentally subjective. The appearances of things are but symbols awaiting artistic interpretation. They possess truth only through artist, only *interior truth*. The Naturalists' blinkered perspective, which could grasp only material effects, drove them to this objective, descriptive style. Put differently, they sought to abolish Style altogether. Those hoary definitions, smooth-worn by endless citation, rather embarrass one to repeat. Yet they hold, *Style makes the man*, but man is first and foremost his soul. A man's style shows in his characteristic bearing, his vocal timbre, his manner of looking, walking, sitting, wearing his clothes, even in how those clothes eventually crease and fold—for the body merely gives form to the soul—quite as much as in his prose. Having proclaimed man soulless, the Naturalists attempted to write without style, whilst paradoxically hoping to capture, in this style-less prose, life's own style! Perhaps this very contradiction saved them from utter ruin. Life's style preserved something of prose style, though not entirely, and one must acknowledge that since Flaubert, who brought French literary form to perfection (pulling this off because he transcended mere *Naturalism*), those who claim his mantle have sadly blunted and bent the magnificent instrument he left

them. I refer here not to Goncourt and Huysmans, who possess genuinely remarkable writerly gifts. I mean Zola, Maupassant, and their epigones. Their language isn't literary, being graceless, inexact, characterless, leaden, commonplace—it's journalism. Zola must be prodigiously gifted to wring even occasional grandeur from such a medium! The feeling he more often produces, alas, is tedium, with those endless, pointless descriptions, stillborn from this obsession with external truth. When he claims to express the *whole* truth and names himself Balzac's heir, how can one not retort: but Balzac was a visionary! Balzac believed in the inner reality of the world he created: he didn't copy, he *created*! He observed this world through imagination more than life, which is precisely why it rings truer than your world transcribed line by line, word by word. Balzac and Stendhal—like Dickens and Thackeray—whom the Naturalists claim as forebears, were imaginative writers whose creations ring true precisely because they are imagined, for "imagination is the soul's eye[45]," "truth's sovereign[46]," "the faculty through which we apprehend the divine[47]." To achieve their colossal task of synthesising the world churning around them, they never made the naturalist blunder of trusting solely to personal experience and physical sight. Personal experience might mislead. They tested it against universal human experience, against ageless tradition and the verdict of that faultless judge dwelling in every breast, untouched by the grievances of personal experience. They shut their physical eyes, which might equally mislead, to sharpen and unleash the soul's vision. Perhaps, save Balzac who was omniscient, they undervalued the physical springs of human action. The Naturalists deserve credit for spotting the physical motive; their error was giving it pride of place. They have thereby diminished humanity in equal measure.

I understand their desire to convince us that their work is something other than what it is. The meagreness of the result only magnifies their pretensions. Faced with such results, how can one bear them? How can one possibly be satisfied? And indeed, most Naturalists do overshoot the mark—some through ambition, harking back to the past, like Zola who has set himself up as the Victor Hugo of the movement; others through intuition, reaching towards the future, like Goncourt and Huysmans.

But the *rump* exceeds nothing. The imitators cleave more faithfully to the Formula than the Masters themselves. The young Naturalists—already quite long in the tooth!—copy nature with all the patience of the blind. These are the true believers. No soul whatsoever, and not the slightest back door through which Dream might steal in. Laboratory and Document! What a dreary existence these poor young men must lead. No doubt they only write when ill-tempered. Certainly, if they ever experience "poetic moments", they are squandering them at the card table or in a cloud of cigar smoke.

From their work and their masters' seeps an all-pervading tedium. This is no longer the despair we get from the Classics, in which the Romantics took such extravagant pride. It's simply a dull, brutish boredom, a queasiness, a revulsion... Perhaps this disgust springs from the excessive physical outlay involved in writing documented novels. *Omne animal post coitum triste*[tn10]... And as we shall see, the psychological novel—though partly a reaction against the naturalist novel—will inherit this melancholy whilst continuing to mine its source.

But let us sum up.

Summary of the Analysis

Three men and three works perfectly embody and epitomise the three Formulas.

Of these three, only the representative of the classical formula achieves greatness (though he is now almost forgotten). Between the second and third lies roughly the same gulf in merit as between the first and second. These gradations of mind themselves proclaim the varying worth of the Formulas.

Joubert was born in the mid-eighteenth century yet remained proof against its influence. If, as he claims, the Revolution banished his spirit from the real world by rendering it too ghastly to contemplate, the collapse of Christian and classical Art drove him to despair of neither God nor Art. Though somewhat hemmed in by evangelical boundaries, he is as metaphysical as any French mind can be through its own resources—he coins phrases like, *Space is the stature of God*. Rather than see his style falter under the laxity that marked the period, he draws it taut and distils it. He aspires to compress "an entire book into a page, an entire page into a sentence, and that sentence into a single word". This sensibility leads him to divine the prose poem. He articulates it through observations such as: "*It would be curious if style were beautiful only when veiled in some obscurity, that is, wreathed in clouds. Perhaps this holds true when such obscurity springs from its very excellence, from choosing words that shun the commonplace, that eschew the vulgar. Beauty certainly always possesses both visible and hidden dimensions. It certainly never charms us more than when we read it attentively in a language we but half comprehend... The French language contains small words with which almost no one knows what to do... It is equivocation, uncertainty—the suppleness of words, in short—that constitutes one of their chief virtues and permits their precise employment...* Etc." He possesses, as none in his age, the feeling for modern verse. "*Beautiful verses are those that breathe forth like sounds or perfumes*." He neither whimpers nor jeers. He thinks. After La Bruyère, even after Pascal, Joubert thinks. His thoughts, cast in the purest seventeenth-century tradition yet with something modern in their tone, something keen in their substance, achieve essential form in swift, economical expression. He lacks both movement and colour. He is scarcely more than pure intellect. Yet Chateaubriand reveres and consults him as the most reliable guardian of all those certainties he hopes to preserve for future generations. The one from whom the great modern synthesis will mystically flow hearkens, in Joubert, to the pure, profound echo of the past—further purified and deepened by a mind gifted with critical acumen and receptive to the winds of change.

Théophile Gautier dozes through performances of Racine, yet when the curtain falls, he rises and, if asked, will dash off—without a moment's thought—the most brilliant review of this play he never watched. For Gautier cares nothing for subject, nothing for thought. He seeks no subjects. "What are they *going to have me do now*?" Nor does he ponder what he is about to write. Does he ever think? He paints forms in motion that he has the gift of seeing as beautiful. But these forms' inner life eludes him, which is why he cannot paint life: he paints animation, beauty, coldness. When he treats passion, it remains forever secondary, at least in the quality of execution if not in the object's worth. His sensuality is crude and commonplace. His mind occasionally displays curiosity—but to what depths? Yet his hand, his eyes are extraordinary. They eclipse the absent soul. Gautier thinks so little that his talent's sheer brilliance sometimes nearly persuades us that Thought itself is superfluous. He makes us

forget the life he himself forgets. His characters and landscapes possess something other than life: they possess the enchantment of surfaces; they are canvases and statuary. — The work shaped by this master craftsman remains as indifferent and precious to us as a museum collection: one may come to study its marvels, to unlock art's secrets, but it's a perilous refuge for anyone lacking a truly burning flame within. A simple tale would illuminate Théophile Gautier's temperament better than his longest books or any commentary. Not that *Fortunio* represents his masterpiece. Indeed, the term has no meaning with Gautier—he created nothing but masterpieces! But *Fortunio*'s subject afforded him the opportunity, in treating passion there, and violent passion at that, to "externalise" this very passion, rendering it through tones and sounds, colours and gestures. His characters are splendid automata, or rather authentic androids. One small phrase proves particularly telling: "*Fortunio ran his hand along Cinthia's back, but with the same sangfroid as if he were touching marble*." In that phrase lies the essence of the entire Romantic movement. What else has it done but breathe artificial life into beautiful—or grotesque, though the grotesque is Beauty's reverse—forms in motion, yet never forms that move us, for they possess neither nerves nor thoughts. Small wonder Fortunio maintains his sangfroid: it is indeed marble he caresses[48].

Guy de Maupassant began, as Flaubert's disciple, with a masterpiece, *Boule-de-Suif—the* quintessential achievement of the narrowest, most rigorous naturalist formula. The subject is dismal and sordid, the style fitting. What matter that Maupassant has since plummeted to the depths of journalistic hackwork, forfeiting everything there: his feel for external and physical life, his colour, his language, his very identity. What matter that reading the tales he churns out by the dozen—which he "rattles off smartly and polishes off briskly" (to quote the reviewers' cant)—proves as pointless as it is impossible. I believe he has even "proclaimed" somewhere, has formulated the *ideal* of this swashbuckling literature. What matter. He had his hour of literary integrity. Bereft of all thought, lacking even the ghost of an idea, he nonetheless proved brave enough to probe the vilest depths of human motivation. He captured the squalid truth of a humanity without soul, heart, mind, or imagination—thoroughly *modern*, in short—and echoed its retch with pitiless accuracy. — Our hurried age grows weary of prolific scribblers. It takes on trust those "authorised" critics who trumpet *Madame Bovary*, *Germinie Lacerteux* and *L'Assommoir* as naturalist masterworks. Yet readers know that the first of these novels contains a Poet's qualities, the second an artistic grasp of modernity, and the third a Romantic inheritance—all things that transcend mere Sensation. Sensation alone inhabits Maupassant's tale, itself the pure distillation of Naturalism.

II.

The Synthesis

Summary — Chateaubriand and Goethe. — Stendhal, Vigny, Senancour, Nerval. — Hugo. — Balzac; Wagner. — Poe; Baudelaire. — Flaubert; Sainte-Beuve. — Leconte de Lisle; Banville and the Parnassians. — Goncourt; Barbey d'Aurevilly. — Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Verlaine, Judith Gautier, Huysmans, Rimbaud, Mallarmé.

As the brief Romantic and Naturalist periods unfolded in the wake of the exhaustion that came with the long Classical age, certain poets—most of whom found themselves swept up in one or other of these latter movements—discovered, or more vaguely sensed, an aesthetic ideal more complete than any school could offer: more distant, free from the plodding constraints of analysis, at once broader and more penetrating, claiming for itself a universal domain where it might pursue the Absolute. Not one of these Poets—supreme though they be—whom I shall now discuss with reverent joy, awakens in us that perfect, consummated admiration we long for. In none does that genius blaze forth of which Edgar Poe speaks, "*resulting from mental powers equally distributed, arranged in absolute proportion, such that no faculty enjoys undue dominance*." No doubt such genius will forever refuse to manifest itself, lest it discourage posterity. Yet all these poets possess illuminations unknown before their time. Their half-open books reveal new paths to those who can truly read, paths of infinite vista. Nothing written hereafter will be new without owing these masters its grateful homage.

Chateaubriand and Goethe stand at the wellsprings of modernity, marking the base angles of a great spiritual triangle whose apex disappears into the infinite. In them the *mystical spirit* and the *scientific spirit*—both deeply sensual, though in strikingly different ways—collect themselves and achieve self-awareness. They stand worlds apart, occupying the outermost boundaries of human thought. Yet through their mutual exchange of *aesthetic sensuality*, they herald that profound, that urgent contemporary yearning of the human spirit: to unite the mystical and scientific currents into one broad, living stream where Beauty meets Truth in Joy. One might have expected the scientific to swallow the mystical whole. Recently, Science had crossed out the word *Mystery*. With the same stroke, it had eliminated Beauty, Truth, Joy, Humanity. Naturalism bore this out completely, offering us its dreary, vapid brutes, certainly devoid of mystery. Therein lies the problem: they lack in truth precisely to the degree they lack in mystery. The deleted words have re-emerged beneath the erasure: the ink was inferior. In the sphere of Art, their principal battlefield, Mysticism has reclaimed from encroaching, grasping Science not merely what had been stolen, but perhaps something of the domain held by Science besides. The backlash against scientific literature and its insolent and desolating negations has manifested itself not as a grand surge towards joyful Beauty, but rather through a revival of psychological studies that barely acknowledge the organism whilst remaining beholden to science on one hand, and through an unexpected poetic restoration of Catholicism on the other. Three among the greatest Poets of our age—Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Paul Verlaine—are Catholics. Yet their Catholicism, which Catholic and Roman priests greet with hostility rather than mere indifference, bears every mark of a profound return to Origins. These Catholics may well have heeded

Goethe's great word. Taine, having catalogued the inadequate responses the past offers in pursuit of answers to modernity and its challenges, observes:

"Do these even qualify as answers? What do they propose but satiation, stupefaction, deflection, oblivion? Another response exists, more profound, which Goethe first articulated, which we begin to suspect, towards which all the labour and experience of the century converge, and which may well form the substance of literature to come: ENDEAVOUR TO UNDERSTAND YOURSELF AND TO UNDERSTAND THINGS."

These Catholics may have encountered Catholicism at its zenith of splendour and truth whilst returning to the living sources of the past. Its vanished beauties seduced them, and they have brought them back to life. Yet with the actual religion (which is false) that lives (though dead), they form an anachronism that horrifies it. The day a Pope ordered draperies painted over the nudes in Michelangelo's Last Judgement marked the death of Christian art. Contemporary Christianity invariably assumes Tartuffe's posture when confronted with the audacities of these Poets who profess to serve it whilst possessing genius! Hence, they belong not to this Church. They have caught up with and overtaken Chateaubriand. Their faith bears the unpolished lustre of an ancient artefact whose brilliance lay preserved beneath dust: theirs is a rediscovered faith. It serves as pretext more than reason for achieving mystical certainty, though one says this without questioning their obvious sincerity. The mystical spirit exacts revenge upon the scientific spirit that humiliated it by arresting at one of humanity's oldest and simplest "explanations of man and things" some of the world's finest minds, who were suffocating in the airless chamber of science alone, science that neither respects nor comprehends Mystery, and who sought refuge in antiquity and its spacious epochs where the spirit could breathe... What mattered was that the word Mystery be spoken again. Far from preventing us from hearing Goethe's answer, it reinforces it. The sense of Mystery awakens and sustains our passion for Causes. In this grand dialogue of modern thought, Chateaubriand and *Faust*, Goethe and *Le Génie du Christianisme* can find common ground. They converse on the heights, their voices disturbing the same rarefied air. One day their words will fuse into a single magnificent Logos.

Stendhal, Vigny, Senancour, Gérard de Nerval... What shared thread, one might ask, binds these poets together? They share but one trait: they wrote, roughly speaking, between 1820 and 1840, for generations that would read them circa 1880. *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *Les Destinées*, *Obermann*, *Le Rêve et la Vie* —our sacred texts! Books ignored at birth.

In Stendhal we encounter a constructive mind, sharp, nervous, an unerring psychologist, utterly modern, nearly indifferent to formal beauty, attuned to the soul's expression, to physiognomy, blessed above all others with an intimate grasp of life—a grasp he possessed only with pen in hand, *inventing truth* with astounding certainty. His pen was a divining rod, the talisman that reveals buried treasure. There exist such men, Balzac and Stendhal for instance, who comprehend life before living it. Their souls are microcosms wherein they need but look to see the world entire. Perhaps they never truly live at all. When roused from their dreams, they pursue only trivial or outsized preoccupations—Stendhal chasing worldly triumphs that slip through his fingers, Balzac launching vast commercial ventures that overwhelm him. Yet these very minds that life makes fools of, once restored to their poetic element, grasp and lay bare life's most hidden workings. One teaches the art of securing victories he never won; the other conjures businessmen whose faces startle with their truth, initiating us into the vast daily machinery of commerce and banking. For others, whose inner realm enchants and consoles them for

existing, "Life itself is the dream[49]." For Stendhal, his dream is life. The concept of passion, more than passion itself, enthrals him. He is a great intelligence in the grip of passion.

Alfred de Vigny: a Raphael painted in shadow, a recluse, a soul at once proud, tender, and wounded—a true Poet.

Forever engaged in silent colloquy with himself on humanity's gravest concerns, he rarely breaks his silence except to write—with a kind of bitter, fierce joy—one of those sombre, pristine pages: *La Mort du Loup*, *La Maison du Berger*, *Le Jardin des Oliviers*. This joy isn't despair wrapped in cruel irony. Rather, the Poet draws from his unblemished pride and conscious honour the will to live and capacity to love. These works are trembling protests, rebellions more profound than any of Manfred's, against the injustice of the God who would have ordained the conditions imposed upon our lives.

S'il est vrai qu'au jardin sacré des Écritures
Le Fils de l'Homme ait dit ce qu'on voit rapporté,
Muet, aveugle et sourd au cri des créatures,
Si le ciel nous laissa comme un monde avorté,
Le Juste opposera le dédain à l'absence
Et ne répondra plus que par un froid silence
Au silence éternel de la Divinité.

[If it be true that in Scripture's holy ground
The Son of Man spoke words we see recorded,
Mute, blind, and deaf to every creature's sound,
If heaven left us stillborn and aborted,
The Just shall meet absence with disdain
And answer only with cold silence
The eternal silence of the Divine domain.]

The austere tone, the *restraint* of this rebellion proclaims the rare qualities of the soul that ventures it—one passionate in conviction yet composed in its protest. Vigny descends from Pascal. Less mighty, less inspired, more concerned with external and emotional dimensions, Vigny has the same unflinching honesty as Pascal, and their meditations share a theme: *Les Destinées*. Some have deemed Vigny an atheist: he is no more so than Pascal. Pascal feels the Temple he champions collapsing beneath him. Vigny surveys the wreckage, pronounces it bereft of divine resonance—bereft at last!—and moves on. Yet like every Human worthy of the name, he seeks God. His boundless melancholy springs from living in an interregnum. His sorrow mirrors Musset's, mirrors Senancour's.

Qui de nous, qui de nous va devenir un Dieu!

[Who among us, who among us shall become a God!] [50]

Each lacks a symbol of the Infinite answering their soul's every yearning. Art—Beauty in itself—cannot yet stand alone, whilst the Gospel now speaks in a tongue long dead. Yet Vigny, perhaps unconsciously, strives with all his might to invest Art with its absolute mission. In *Stello*, Vigny depicts the rare atmosphere a Poet needs: he must be surrounded by those who know to treat him with reverence and thoughtful discretion. The verse of *Les Destinées* approaches modern verse itself. It trails only slightly behind the innovations of Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire. Moreover, Vigny grasps the

supreme vocation of the Poet, naming him "the late-coming conqueror." He even intuits that this Poet's true calling, his first and final duty, lies not in amassing beautiful ruins of chance, but in raising a monument[51]—and more remarkably still, that this Poet will create *in full consciousness of his inspiration*.

Sénancour[52] embodies all the beautiful, piercing sorrows of the poet of his time.

He is not yet resigned to being less than a man, to letting himself, like Goethe, be branded with hypocrisy and egoism so as to raise, far from the frenzy stirred by passion, that monument Vigny spoke of. Sénancour, ever the genius adrift in solitude and doubt; a desolate genius caught between what the mind dreams and what the heart needs, satisfying neither, yet whose plaints and shadow-murmurs carry a raw sincerity I find more authentic than the shouts of many so-called living souls. The sickness of hope—how far his dreams outstrip his powers—here lies the chief source of Sénancour's melancholy, and indeed of every sadness in his age. But there are others, and these two further causes constitute those aspects of his genius for which our own era might particularly cherish him. This man, who shuns civic duties and lives "wretched and almost ridiculous on a subjugated earth," who speaks with strikingly immediate conviction of love's natural freedom, possesses—like Shelley at the same moment—a less lyrical but more penetrating feel for a pantheistic poetry where man would not dissolve into nature but would become faithfully, truly her son and bear her likeness. This likeness Obermann discovers within himself, drawing from it a pride that places him inwardly beside *man as he ought to be*. He finds it in that instinct which, more than to anyone else, yields to him the meaning of natural things, above all flowers:

"The jonquil or jasmine alone would suffice to make me say that, *such as we are, we might inhabit a better world*."

People say this Obermann, like all his contemporaries, read Rousseau and took from him both this revulsion from society and this love of nature. They forget, though, that both spring from an extraordinarily intense inner life, so intense that it perhaps yields, in its day, only to the dreadful meditation Balzac pursued without rest. Here is the second and nobler of the two personal sources I promised for Sénancour's sadness: he never learnt to choose between the sentimental joy of action and the austere happiness of dwelling within oneself. Yet at least, failing to choose, he had the strength to point to the better path.

Gérard de Nerval—the wondrous mystery of that inner life!

In him this sense would at times grow so exalted as to shatter the equilibrium and harmony of the other senses, disturbing life itself. While they remain more intuited than proved, supreme gifts—gifts whose full flowering brings all elements of genius into balance and strength—unjustly monopolise the entire spirit: pierce it, intrigue it, threaten to corrupt it. Thus the same gift, belonging to Gérard de Nerval, produces *Le Rêve et la Vie*, — sublime passages in an incoherent work where the inner life, instead of governing the outer without merging with it, now annihilates it, now depraves it; whilst belonging to Balzac, it produces *Louis Lambert* and *Séraphita*, works of perfect poise. Yet Nerval's intuition remains lucid. This perception—of two simultaneous existences dwelling within one soul—falters only when he either arrests its movement toward symbol or detaches it too sharply from the wholeness of ordinary experience. He shifts between direct and indirect approaches in an enervating hesitancy.

But what extraordinary pages! That madness—what astonishing intelligence of the invisible and unheard!

"...Everything in nature assumed new aspects, and secret voices issued from plant, tree, animals, the humblest insects, to warn and hearten me. My companions' speech held mysterious turns whose sense I grasped. Objects without form or life submitted themselves to my mind's calculations. From combinations of pebbles, patterns of angles, cracks and openings, leaf-cuttings, colours, scents and sounds, I saw emerge harmonies hitherto unknown. How, I asked myself, could I have existed so long outside nature without identifying myself with her? Everything lives, everything acts, everything corresponds. Magnetic rays emanating from myself or others traverse without obstacle the infinite chain of created things. A transparent web covers the world, whose delicate threads communicate, link by link, with planets and stars. Captive now upon earth, I commune with the choir of stars that partakes in my joys and sorrows."

To this magnificent intuition of works where art would rest on metaphysics, Nerval adds both a feeling for legends and for the truly modern line: far nimbler than Vigny's, far tauter than Lamartine's, and infinitely more poetic than Hugo could achieve—authentic dream-verse of which Les Chimères provides brief, rare, but undeniable specimens.

I have just named Hugo. I have already observed that he is the storehouse of all formulae and stands at the brink of all intuitions. Yet as for concrete achievement, his work lies in ruins and his influence on the future will be virtually nil. Perhaps we shall, somewhat cramped by our hunger for the rare, the particular, the acute, profit from plunging again into Hugo's inexhaustible torrent—but no one will seek his guidance anymore. He believed that by gathering into his hands the threads of the spiritual web stretching around him, he would erect the monument before which posterity would kneel. And behold, that monument has collapsed, leaving only some superb stretches of wall standing—things like *L'Homme qui rit* and *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (perhaps too literary, but flawlessly literary), admirable verses here and there (not one entire poem!), and scattered passages of prose[53]. Still, let us pay him substantial tribute: by legitimizing the freedoms his age knew it needed, he illuminated—in his own fine phrase—"the twilight of things to come," stamping his name upon a decisive hour in modern evolution. Moreover, if he lacks direct rapport with the new generations, he affects them indirectly through their immediate masters, several of whom declare themselves his disciples, all of whom have felt the sway of ideas that, rightly or wrongly, are embodied in these syllables: Vic-tor Hu-go[54].

I turn now to this century's two genuine masters: Balzac and Wagner.

Honoré de Balzac invented the modern world and painted it with the thoughts of a modern man who vastly outstripped his hour. Without once copying, he achieved truth—that personal, superior Truth which seeks to clothe itself in Beauty. Accepting Madame Necker's definition that "*The novel must be the better world*," Balzac adds, "*But the novel would be nothing if, within this august lie, it weren't true in its details.*" In its details, meaning in the deployment of elements that passion brings to life ("*Passion is all humanity*"), and in faithfully reproducing the neutral social surfaces, those conventional conditions of collective human existence. But Balzac animates these principles through his synthetic vision of the world's *unity of composition* and society's kinship with nature. By grounding a literary work on this scientific law of compositional unity, which represents the enduring and elemental law that governs nature, Balzac inaugurates authentic *foundational* Modern Art, whose essence is to return, through science, to original nature and proceed as she does. By distinguishing "truth in the *details*" (though this phrase may not capture Balzac in the entirety of his thought) from the "august lie" through which the novel must "*aspire to the beautiful ideal*," Balzac inaugurates authentic *formal* Modern Art, whose essence is

to bind with Fiction in an arabesque knot these weighty details of truth seized from nature or society through observation or intuition. Finally, far more clearly than Alfred de Vigny, Balzac grasps that the Poet mustn't be left to the mercy of inspiration but must master it, that genius is precisely the deliberate capacity to be inspired, that genius thus ruled by a will itself ruled by reason must devote itself wholly to erecting a single monument, complete and unified[55]. The unity of Balzac's monument is more contrived than genuine. No doubt it should have rested on ideas rather than characters. But Balzac's chief failing—and I venture this criticism with full reverence for this omnipotent genius in whom we discern shadows only through his own reflected light—was this: though dissatisfied with the "Beautiful ideal" he invokes, he left the human soul as he found it, torn between Religion and Art already drifting apart, stretched between the Religion of the Cross and the joys of pure, unfettered Beauty. He who divined everything else failed to divine this: that Art doesn't appeal to merely one part of the soul but claims it entirely, holding as it does the secret of everything, the power to fulfil every desire. Balzac would have grasped this truth had "truth in the details"—so revolutionary then—not commandeered his primary attention, diverting it from the "august lie." Hence surely those flaws we lament in *La Comédie Humaine*'s style and, occasionally, those slight deficiencies of thought. The world's greatest mind courts countless perils if, in its artwork—an artwork that utterly transforms art itself—it doesn't channel all its beliefs and dreams, all its loves and hatreds, all its hunger for happiness towards their natural end. This habit of awarding Christianity a certificate of social utility whilst actually dispensing with it in the work, recalls the strategy of the sacred ark used by Descartes. Fundamentally, Balzac's true Religion is his Art, and what is truly True for him is what he discerns in humanity and strives to extract. One speaks convincingly only of what one believes. Had Balzac pressed through to pure fiction, he would have elevated his ideal of human truth into an Art-Religion. In works like *Séraphita*—sublime riposte to those who accused him of "regarding man as a finite creature"—he grazes this supreme realm, this promised land he won't enter.

But isn't he aware of this himself? I believe so. He knows what he lacks and perhaps views his magnificent achievement as the reality-foundations for the art envisioned for times to come, the artwork of dream! Isn't this the meaning behind those strange words he inscribes to Madame Eveline de Hanska when dedicating *Séraphita* to her? He hopes this novel will be read only by minds "shielded from worldly trivialities by solitude. They would know how to impress upon it *the melodious rhythm it lacks and which would have made it, in one of our poets' hands, the glorious epic France still awaits*." And he asks that this book, which he seems to favour in his œuvre, be accepted from him "*like one of those balustrades carved by some faith-filled artist, against which pilgrims lean to contemplate man's end in quiet admiration of the church and its choir.*" Here are unmistakable intimations of an aesthetic Absolute.

But Balzac doesn't always own them. His preferred position is that of the sociologist: his agenda is to write *the history of manners*[56], to "*capture their hidden sense*" and declare "*how societies stray from or approach the eternal standard of the true and beautiful.*" He went much further, and I believe he knew where his native genius was heading, where it would lead at least through its future influence. I believe I also detect a generous resignation resonating within his Work's incomplete magnificence.

Richard Wagner accomplished two great things: he united all the art forms and synthesised observation and experience through Fiction. Today, none of his contemporaries—I mean those who think and speak sincerely—doubt any longer, after all the interested or merely foolish attacks that

greeted his glorious endeavour, that along the path Wagner opened, at its very terminus, there stands resplendent the dazzling triumph of Art itself.

There seems little point in explaining how Wagner's theatre, whatever certain critics have claimed, does not resurrect Greek drama[57]; how all the aesthetic resources the Master demands—music, stagecraft, poetry—serve the Action. These truths are well known to those for whom I write. Nor need we belabour the profound and weighty influence Wagnerian thought exerts—and will increasingly exert, so fruitfully!—upon minds committed to the luminous path.

What bears consideration is why this Thought does not itself constitute that triumphant gesture of which I spoke, the gesture that would bring everything to its conclusion (and which doubtless never will exist). Why this singular Work still leaves a gap between itself and the ultimate Goal? These are regrets and desires to whisper only in hushed tones, between two or three respectful yet independent souls—final regrets and desires which I nevertheless set down in print, secure in risking them without peril in our clamorous age when no one listens, confident they will prove harmless in this time when, as I have observed, silence has ceased to exist.

Three regrets, then.

First: *union*, not *synthesis*, of the art forms.

No single art dominates—and there's the rub. Let us spare ourselves the hoary debate about which art takes precedence. Better to be decisive: the art that stands foremost is that which approaches most closely the source to which all must return—Thought itself. What stands nearest to thought is what speaks with greatest precision. This is manifestly Poetry. Yet precisely because it speaks with precision (even when it manages to cloak itself in enchantments—as the new Poets have shown, M. Paul Verlaine among them), Poetry may lack that essential Vagueness, the shimmering, translucent veil that Beauty requires. But if Poetry enlists the other arts to supply this vital atmospheric and emotional Vagueness, then let Poetry rule them! Otherwise, we have juxtaposition, perhaps union, but never synthesis or fusion.

Language forms the natural bond between spectator and spectacle, transforming the semblances of reality that listen into the realities of dream that speak. Language and Light together extend the theatrical experience from Stage to Auditorium, creating between the gesture seen and the faces watching an exchange of sympathy and emotion that flows back to nourish the very Gesture that sparked it. Let Language, therefore, permit Music to create the atmosphere in which the Word achieves its fullest significance, the way a sovereign prepares his route before setting out, not appearing immediately but sending his retinue ahead. Then, upon this prepared stage, let Language reveal itself in its true majesty.

Think about this: perhaps because he failed to give Poetry primacy over the other arts, Wagner felt compelled to eliminate that secondary drama played between Stage and Auditorium—a drama I sorely miss in this theatre where only the Stage receives illumination, as though to demonstrate through a device too crude and conventional (and therefore demonstrating nothing) that the Dream, being alone visible, alone matters, that light silences shadow. (Or perhaps the French—the Latin—temperament simply resists this arbitrary diktat of the German Master?) Art's misfortune was that Wagner proved more musician than poet.

Second: Wagner synthesises observation and experience through Fiction.

But what manner of fiction? Historical fiction, though he pushes History back to the very borders of Legend itself. He conjures a specific time, a specific place. How worthy of Wagner it would have been to crown his work (after all his predecessors' attempts to achieve dream through that old stratagem of temporal and spatial distance) with the total abolition of time and space, with the blossoming of Dream in its true homeland—timeless and place-less, not the forgotten but the unknown, not what lies too far from the solid ground beneath our feet, but that magnificent Country you won't find on any earthly map.

Third and finally: though Wagner certainly graced the splendours of his music drama with the profound power of religious feeling, he has achieved little more than Balzac or any other in wedding Religion and Art through that inevitable return to the original unity of Truth and Beauty.

His thinking, more nakedly revealed in his theoretical writings than in his dramas[58], admits no ambiguity: Wagner failed to recognise the divine calling of Supreme Religion that belongs to Supreme Art. He restricts Art's pursuit of Truth to *clarifying the divine truth within religion through idealised representations of religious allegory*. But which religion does he mean, in our modern era when Criticism has shredded the Myths preserved and worshipped since antiquity? Contemporary Criticism forbids belief in the incredible, yet the modern spirit, like its ancient counterpart, hungers for sublime mysteries. How could Wagner not grasp that since *religion survives for art only by shrouding its kernel of truth beneath ever-mounting layers of incredibilities*, and since humanity now refuses to have these beautiful illusions submitted to reason, they must be offered to imagination ALONE! These incredible, marvellous elements that maintain truth at its proper distance—adorably remote, perpetually just beyond reach—belong to Art not as consequences, not as handmaidens to some Gospel, but as principles in their own right! Wagner's position here might have sufficed in an age of religious triumph—but at present…

Then there are those who worked on a smaller scale but cut deeper: Edgar Poe and Baudelaire —that illustrious pair standing guard at the sacred Feast.

It's old news now that Edgar Poe, barely glimpsed in France[59], found there what proved the natural home for his glory—a glory left orphaned in his actual, thoroughly artificial homeland. He and Baudelaire share a spiritual kinship that deserves to be understood as indivisible.

Before Poe, this feeling for *poetic consciousness* was scarcely more than a presentiment; through him alone it gains its full rights, his entire work lending beauty's authority to what logic could only hint at. This work survives only in fragments, left by life's circumstances, yet divine fragments nonetheless. Here he could seldom display this consciousness directly through pure art, but rather obliquely, in pages where the most sublime Poet revealed only his less rare gifts. There he made *Curiosity* into an extraordinary passion. We admire him less for the flawless architecture of his Tales, for his perfect command of suspense building to its final burst, than for his profound grasp of that uncharted territory of nature and humanity which Victor Hugo had seen only in outline: the grotesque and the horrible. Quasimodo remains a vulgar monster, interesting only for his hump. Poe finds the grotesque in the soul, in the heart, and especially in the mind; he speaks to our souls, not our eyes alone. Everything becomes spirit in his hands, achieves spiritual synthesis. His fictions, though quivering with the most violent sensations, preserve a wholly spiritual character. His passions exceed humanity. His grotesque creatures are demons, his beautiful ones angels. And like humanity, he surpasses life itself,

whether through sheer intensity of feeling or through death, beyond which he perceives an ardent, mysterious existence.

Let us grant him his due: he is the Poet of Love in Fear, Love in Madness, and Love in Death.

His creations preserve the *singular* quality natural to their exceptional atmosphere, which he explicitly identifies as one of Beauty's laws. The Exception! Here perhaps lies Poe's most telling feature, his richest contribution to art. Only through the exceptional can the new Poets achieve their lofty dreams of learned aristocracy and pristine beauty. And these exceptional, singular figures—Ligeia, Morella, the two pale denizens of the House of Usher—what passionate frenzy pounds in "their inert angelic breasts[60]"! This frenzy belongs to the Poet himself! Yet it never clouds his awareness, and through the most tangled webs of horror, madness, or fear, he keeps the unshakeable clarity of the Master who has tamed Chance. Death and Horror he gladly sets in sumptuous frames—a deliberate choice—where objects' ironic life seeps through, where splendour hones anguish, where the heroes of sorrowful dreams watch their nightmares pull faces at them. The sense of the Exception, the Spiritual (singular) sense of Beauty in intensity, and the Lyrical sense of Science constitute Poe's three most glorious claims to eternal admiration.

People ask how Science and Art will achieve the great synthesis yet to come? Pascal, Balzac, Edgar Poe, M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam have the answer. Art will use Science as a foothold to secure firm ground, then vault over it on Intuition's wings. Read *Eurêka*, that romance and poem, that sweeping religious, scientific and lyrical vision that makes *Faust* jealous. Poe singles out Melancholy as what is fundamental to Beauty. I sacrifice neither respect nor wisdom in observing that at the time Poe gave voice to his vision, this was indeed Beauty's essential character. But his words, if merely echoed today, would ring false to his vision's true intent. Life being the wretched thing it is, while Art still lacked the means to *fully* realise our dreams of happiness, it had to remain in mourning for the joys life withholds and Art could not yet conjure in dreams.

Poe never knew Wagner. He lived in that hour like the vigils before Christian feasts, when the Church demands every physical and moral suffering from the faithful, so that tomorrow's celebration might blaze brighter against today's shadow. But Wagner has spoken, and Science, coming to Art's aid, offers miraculous means of realisation. Today Poe would declare that Beauty's essential, fundamental character is Joy[61].

Poe and Baudelaire were creatures of the same era. Baudelaire has catalogued, as it were, our grounds for sorrow. Like some prince of darkness, he has drawn through Art a beam of black light. "He has laid bare the morbid psychology of the spirit reaching its sensations' October; chronicled the symptoms of souls claimed by suffering, chosen by spleen; exposed the spreading rot of impressions when beliefs and enthusiasms held in youth have withered, when only the dry memory remains of miseries borne, intolerances endured, bruises inflicted by minds crushed under absurd fate.[62]." His glory rests in "having managed, when verse served only to render the outer surface of beings and things, to express the inexpressible through a muscular, fleshy language that possessed, beyond all others, the uncanny power to capture with disturbing precision the most elusive, most troubled morbid states of spent spirits and grieving souls[63]." He dedicated his sad vigil to blazing secret trails through the soul's depths. He took the measure of evil, of artifice, and fell for them perversely, joylessly, like someone pronouncing his own damnation for love of Justice. Baudelaire is a sensualist sentenced to

mysticism, alien to scientific explanation, adrift on the currents of modern vice yet watching them with an eye as stern as a Latin priest—a fallen priest, no doubt, all the sterner for it. Latin and traditional in his exacting moral taste, in his thought's logic amid dreams; Latin and Roman in the squared force of his brief genius—not short, but concentrated—utterly assured, rich, dark, in his very poetics and especially his rhetoric, in the razor-sharp discipline of his expression. Baudelaire both discovered modern verse and plunged French genius back into its living springs, refusing it those illogical liberties that had been corrupting it. He distilled French Poetry into his verse and his prose—that matchless prose of the *Petits Poèmes* and the *Paradis Artificiels*! This mighty effort and the desolate object of his relentless vision left him incurably bitter. What a tragic and magnificent face this Poet wears! Look at him, not in the poor portrait from *Les Fleurs du Mal*[64], but in the aged Baudelaire a late photograph reveals. That scornful mouth and those probing, judging eyes, perhaps without much interest left, but without pity either! Every vile thought reflected in that handsome face, like an endless vision of punishment. The hair still long and going grey, one side of the face mocking, the other rigid as death, the eyes wild, the lips clenched in disgust...

Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve, M. Leconte de Lisle and the Parnassians[65], all have contributed, in formal terms, to a great literary revolution. Fundamentally, each has produced work of uneven interest, yet each, in its way, anticipates what is to come.

Whether languages ever reach a fixed state is an idle question. Every writer today fashions his own language to some degree. Yet I believe that for those more eager to articulate new things than to mint new words, it is infinitely precious that a man of genius should have dedicated his chief endeavour to achieving the most assured, most powerfully beautiful form of literary French—classical and romantic at once, both traditional and animated, perfect. This endeavour constitutes Flaubert's achievement and his glory. To the first-time reader, this Poet seems to have created French prose itself, and to have created it as though from without, from afar, omitting to sign his page. Avoiding nuance for this purpose, he fosters the illusion that each thought, each idea, each sensation, each feeling finds its designation in a single, certain word. His gaze sweeps wide but remains somewhat general; he feels in a manner more extensive than profound. Sainte-Beuve, conversely, reveals his own failings, his inadequacy to high ambitions, forever speaking of himself, signing his every word, offering us the subtle analysis—which would be exhaustive—of his faults, his remorse, his intentions, his scruples, the whole resolving into a dense yet somehow weightless ennui, the tedium of a reasonable, mature mind determined to be neither the dupe of others nor of itself. With him, all is nuance. Ideas and feelings divide, scatter, and the desire to reach that primary, precise element—which perpetually eludes—draws the Poet into a delicious, bewildering vagueness of both soul and style. Someone has delightfully compared Sainte-Beuve's sentence to a chorus of shades beside the black river, imploring the traveller to utter on their behalf the fateful word that must deliver them, which they have forgotten, which they seek in vain and which the traveller may never discover, yet which he is confident he knows, which trembles perpetually on his lips. This word is the *mot juste*—the word that does not exist, the one Flaubert wields with illusory and magnificent boldness, on condition that he remain within the universal realm of general representations[66]. Sainte-Beuve possesses that thoroughly modern desire to *say everything*. This mind steeped in the classics touches constantly upon the insufficiency of the education they have afforded him. At every moment he would invent new vocabulary, yet timid, doubtless prudent, he settles for creating verbal alliances through which he *suggests* what he wishes yet cannot express. His sentence—I speak of the writer of *Volupté*, not of the *Lundis*, where he becomes merely an

exceptional literary journalist—takes pleasure in equivocal turns that are precisely the sole honesty of the artist in possession of delicate and subtle thoughts and sensations, his only "integrity". It carries the echo of a gentle plaint that, discreet as it is, will never cry out. — Yes, the plaint of a shade, a lament that does not utter itself yet wishes to be divined.

From Sainte-Beuve dates the first essay in *literary suggestion*. He neither explains nor describes, yet knows how to make us see and feel. He achieves this even more distinctly through his verse than his prose. In truth, his verses are often curious rhymed prose—that *Monsieur Jean*, for instance, his most singular experiment. The very taste for detail brings about this unexpected yet logical result: In his case, the fine points of feeling overwhelm the fine points of articulation. All yields nothing. Everything is underscored. The poem, like an exceedingly fine, exceedingly ordered, exceedingly fluid fabric, has neither rents nor spangles. The subjects Sainte-Beuve deems worthy of his attention, subjects best served by attending to small matters, inertias, and tenderness, necessarily called for this form. It wears upon the reader, as do those subjects that bring it into play.

With greater force and intensity, either Sainte-Beuve would escape himself, become mere vapour, or he would arrive at that deliberately personal, nervous and liberated language which the Goncourt brothers have made their own. Sainte-Beuve wavers too much between Tradition and this need to express new sentiments in new forms[67].

Thus Flaubert and Sainte-Beuve, each in his distinct manner, had recast French prose. What they accomplished for prose was achieved for verse by M. Leconte de Lisle, M. Théodore de Banville and the Parnassians[68].

The absurd imitators of Lamartine, Musset and Hugo, and Hugo himself—that vague philosopher of *Religions et Religion* and *L'Âne*—had let Verse go slack: impoverished rhymes, hateful padding, makeweights and slovenliness. Verse in their hands had grown flaccid, limp, bodiless and headless, hollow yet bloated—it was amounting to nothing. They believed they filled it with witless cries they mistook for passion and platitudes they mistook for thought. Against this deluge of cowardice and nullity, M. Leconte de Lisle, with an unerring sense of the necessities imposed by the moment, set disciplined form, austerely beautiful, and moral impassivity. M. Leconte de Lisle is a great conscious artist, and his melancholy, elevated work bears the hallmarks of an imposing perfection. The finest among the younger minds followed his lead. For them, irreproachable form and dispassionate thought became rallying cries. The Parnasse, which stands as the symmetrical antithesis to the Romantic school, has rendered Art signal services. Some claim there was excess in their doctrine of Art for Art's sake. I believe there was prescient clarity, and that the School's sole error lay in not daring to pursue their principle to its ultimate conclusions. Indeed, that grand formula—art for art's sake—transcended the Parnassians' own conception. They confined Art to being scarcely more than Expression, and for many it amounted to nothing but *form for form's sake*. Yet even so, such as it was, their doctrine was salutary and necessary. They reforged and retempered the noble Verse, rendered it worthy of serving genuine works, fit to undergo final and essential modifications. Is it not a telling spectacle, this Art of the nineteenth century in the aftermath of Romanticism? Whilst the final Formula evolves—the naturalist formula requiring neither numerous practitioners nor extensive time—the true Artists undertake a far more arduous and valuable labor: the refinement of Art's instruments, Prose and Verse. Among these artists, one actually propels the Naturalist movement itself: Flaubert. Others include Sainte-Beuve, Messieurs Leconte de Lisle, Théodore de Banville, Catulle Mendès, Léon Cladel, Léon Dierx, François

Coppée, Paul Verlaine, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Stéphane Mallarmé, José-Maria de Heredia, and Armand Silvestre. Yet beyond this shared endeavour, and concurrent with it, each of these artists devotes themselves to the completion of a personal work in which, admittedly, the artist-element prevails over the poet-element.

Flaubert and M. Leconte de Lisle stand as the last of the *historical* Poets. In their work, the scrupulous pursuit of truth, that "fidelity to detail" Balzac made his watchword, becomes, though scarcely to their credit, a tyranny. They remain bound to Fiction's imperatives yet bring to them no fresh voice. *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* and *Salammbô*, *Les Poèmes Antiques* and *Les Poèmes Barbares* belong to the same fictional order as *Les Martyrs* and *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The only substantive difference lies in their varying degrees of factual precision. Yet in form, in the sentiment expressed, and in their choice of subject matter, they effect a revolution. Flaubert and M. Leconte de Lisle cry out with less violence, more inwardly than their forebears, but their lament cuts deeper and springs from more authentic pain. They no longer pine over love's sorrows. Their affliction strikes at the very core of their being, at the dread of knowing nothing, at

La honte de penser et l'horreur d'être un homme.

[The shame of thinking and the horror of being human.]

And remarkably, their lament—though it plumbs greater depths than the already passé Romantic complaint—proves far more *controlled*, aesthetically finer, possessed of a beauty that satisfies (perhaps unconsciously) half their souls' hunger for transcendence. Through them, Art strides towards its sacred calling. Beauty that consoles through mere presence, or at least sustains the will to live—is this not already a Religion? As for established faiths, neither Flaubert nor M. Leconte de Lisle spare them much thought, least of all the so-called living religions, which seem long dead to their eyes. They make no attempt to reconstruct the machinery of a society ruled and inspired by great faith, nor to stage for us the noble contest between Christian belief and earthly love. To them, this Gospel lies deader than those it destroyed. It is to those ancient victims, rather, that they would appeal for answers, or to others the Gospel never even imagined. Saint-Antoine reveals a soul tortured by visions of Life's Paradises; Salammbô serves as priestess to Tanit. M. Leconte de Lisle subjects Vedic Art and the religions of classical antiquity to careful examination. These two Poets brought modernity its most valuable gift: Art that draws from formal perfection the consoling thrill of a Religion of Beauty, and Thought that returns to its wellsprings to seek the metaphysical nourishment for that Beauty. Beyond this, Flaubert is praised for his "objectivity", M. Leconte de Lisle for his painter's eye for landscapes and beasts, and his stoic detachment. I maintain that Art is fundamentally and exclusively subjective. Impassibility was a truth that has become an error—a momentary necessity, nothing more. As for M. Leconte de Lisle's creatures, their pulse beats no stronger than that of figures captured in oil. They are *catalogued*. The very techniques of description sometimes want for subtlety. Those elephants, for instance, that make the earth tremble, recognized mostly by the noise they make, strike one as rather stock figures. The vaunted fidelity to detail falls short in this instance. We miss that shuffling gait of the ancient, enormous monk dragging his sandals that so distinctly marks the elephant's tread; that rhythmic, sacred sway of the massive head and trunk... Shift the angle slightly, and this philosophy of nothingness reveals itself as rhetorical posturing rather than serious reflection.

"M. Théodore de Banville belongs, through his genius, to the generation now coming into its own. While he finds solace for living in our prosaic and dismal age by recalling the Hellenic roots that

ground our race, he has nevertheless felt and understood all our afflictions. Among our Masters, he wields the most vital and blessed influence upon the future."[69]

To call M. Théodore de Banville merely the greatest living poet who has fulfilled his promise falls short. I believe Poetry itself animates his soul. How, one wonders, amidst this critical century, suffering its miseries like any other, in this land of censorship and academies, could a man of this time and place recall humanity's true, pristine, primordial joy, stand against the relentless tide of convention, and not merely write or speak but *sing* (like those bards who went in company with the Greek host to Troy, rousing them for battle and soothing them after), yet in singing appear, lest he offend, to do nothing more than write or speak like his contemporaries. With a language of dead vocables, worn smooth as old coins beneath fingers idle for two centuries, how did he succeed in conjuring the blessed illusion of an endless cascade of fresh jewels? His soul, I insist, must be Poetry incarnate, which is why his eternal youth no longer leaves us in a state of bewilderment, nor his lyrical genius that plays with words, compelling them to trace harmonious, startling, meaningful arcs, so profound yet allowing itself to seem artless. The Poet of *Les Exilés* and *Odes Funambulesques* has rescued Parnassus from the potential absurdity the pomposity of its bearing nearly invited, and recognising that Melancholy cannot be Art's final destination, has blazed the trail towards that joyous dawn where all shall be renewed. This single word proclaims his exalted station: *Joy* dwells in him! Joy in ideas, joy in colours and sounds, the supreme joy of Rhyme and Ode. M. de Banville has demonstrated in verse and expounded in his *Petit Traité de la Poésie française* that Poetry is intrinsically lyrical and Rhyme the quintessence of Verse. He has likewise affirmed and proven that Drama must be an ode in dialogue. Though certain contemporary innovators appear to have forgotten this, and though we must certainly nurture and advance the reform already achieved, forever liberating Expression further—within, naturally, its inviolable limits—I believe Integral Art will remain deeply indebted to the Master who first articulated these twin principles. Better than anyone, he has illuminated the relationship between Truth and Fiction, shown how life's raw material must be enriched by Imagination's conquests, and defined the dual calling of Art: to realise Dream through Life, to beautify Life through Dream.

"*This double purpose: to make us forget Life while representing it still. For nothing can engage us that is not life, yet we cannot rejoice unless our troubles are magically dispersed and banished by almighty Illusion*."

And elsewhere, declaring the need to breathe spiritual essence into the objects of the artwork:

"*No material object speaks directly to our soul, and our soul responds only to what calls to it without mediation*."

He understands that everything resides in Beauty, that a poem's *worth* lies in its beauty. While he hasn't explicitly declared that Beauty presupposes Truth, that mankind will one day allow the former to guide it to the latter, I doubt he would resist this notion. Finally, as much as Gérard de Nerval himself, though with greater self-command, M. de Banville has a genius for conjuring the marvellous, paired with the restlessness before the enduring miracle at the heart of life, as well as the worship of woman for the mystery she embodies as much as for the delights her beauty inspires[70]. He has felt the great tremor of the young generation that pushes for answers where previous generations had been content not to know. He understands that Art now roots itself in profound metaphysics. As witness who admires and comprehends, who knows these noble sufferings, this ultimate struggle between Man and Nature, he observes:

"No longer a chivalrous duel but earnest combat that he must wage against eternal Isis; he seeks not merely to lift her veils but to rend them, destroy them utterly, and bereft of his vanished Gods, to possess at least immutable Nature herself, sensing that from her these Gods shall rise again to populate anew the wildernesses of boundless azure and the mysterious gardens where stars spring into bloom."

This is the Poet who has been called—and has allowed himself to be called—unthinking, simply because, as consummate artist, his verses touch thought only through the sounds and colours of the Symbol that embodies it. Let them chatter on, just as he permitted them to. We who understand, let us admire and love.

I believe M. Catulle Mendès is endowed with the gifts of a supremely great Poet. If he remains merely the most prodigious of artists, should we hold him, or his time responsible? The Parnasse, as we know, is his achievement above all others, born of his energy, his tireless activity, and his undeniable talent. Perhaps he has remained too loyal to the school he championed so brilliantly. Perhaps the very nature of his talent—so pliant, so multifaceted, so adept at mastering every technique—has prevented him from achieving that singleness of vision essential to unified work. He is without question the most brilliant of men, the most receptive and erudite of artists. He could not possibly be blind to Art's ultimate destiny. Of this I am sure—he knows. Form itself, omniscient as it is, must surely have whispered all its secrets to him. Yet he does not serve these higher ends. He is content to write things—admirable past all doubt—that gesture towards an ideal suspended between past and future. His energies are spent on perfections that matter less. If this springs from indifference or scepticism, we cannot absolve him.

The oeuvre of M. Léon Dierx stands noble and pure. This Poet, whom success has scarcely courted (nor has he courted success), will endure, treasured above all by the young. His is a melancholic intelligence of Nature and her human echoes, an art of profound harmony from one who both feels and thinks. As M. Mendès so aptly puts it[71]: "I doubt there has ever lived a man more intimately, more essentially poet than M. Léon Dierx."

M. François Coppée presents a most curious and appealing figure. One can hardly imagine the rising generation turning to him for the key to fresh inspiration. His work marks an ending. Yet it has merit, and he is right to trust in it. His vision is entirely his own, justified, though not supplied, by glimmerings from Hugo, from Baudelaire and M. de Banville, but above all from Théophile Gautier and Sainte-Beuve.

M. de Hérédia, whose talent is infinitely less subtle though more thunderous than that of M. Mendès, is likewise above all an artist. From dreams of gold and blood, splendidly theatrical, he fashions poems devoid of thought yet brimming with movement and colour, verses at once sonorous and vigorous.

M. Armand Silvestre—in whom the prose writer might eclipse the poet, that poet intoxicated with pure Lyricism—has written, particularly in his *Paysages Métaphysiques*, some of the finest verses I know. The very title of this section from M. Silvestre's first collection reveals how this singer, who later let sensuality flood his work, possessed a true instinct for the new paths ahead.

M. Léon Cladel, Baudelaire's disciple, remains the bard of his Rouergue skies and fields. The City taught him that in its eyes, the Countryside stands for an *ultima Thule*, and he sings the Countryside with the voice of a countryman who knows, with rustic shrewdness, how to present simple fruits to city-dwellers in ways that startle. He lacks the gift of verse, but this astonishing stylist has forged his

prose into a true poet's instrument, better suited, however, to conveying physical stirrings and exertions than sentiments, ideas, and thoughts. Yet, since he magnifies his actions and characters with epic intensity, one might say he crowns them with a heroic aura in the reader's imagination.

To these last six Poets let us offer our disinterested tribute. They have been keener to work, on their own account, the veins already opened than to prospect for new ones. We salute these accomplished works as handsome monuments beside the road.

Finally, among the undisputed Initiators, I have reserved two Masters: M. Edmond de Goncourt and M. Barbey d'Aurevilly, who, despite their differing principles, have brought equally fertile consequences to Art.

M. de Goncourt's genuine merits seem to me quite other than those he most wishes acknowledged. History reduced to deciphering century-old curios, the human document, initiating the modern public into Japanese Art—these form the most visible portion of his work, not the most substantial. M. de Goncourt has grasped, with greater acuity than any who came before, what we must term (for want of a better word, since linguistic tradition inevitably fails when addressing what most specifically distinguishes today from yesterday) *Modernity*. He has perceived how the uniform mask science imposes on nature wherever it directly touches humanity drains the human element from things, while things themselves reclaim, in threatening silence, their autonomous life, alien to a humanity thus vanquished by its own triumph and powerless to reclaim its ruins as they revert to nature. He has observed how in society, whose members, sacrificed to the collective, also bear this yoke of uniformity, certain abominable or exquisite exceptions rebel against the decree to wear a single mask, concealing beneath it their true face: their *Physiognomy*[72]. Through his paramount attention to human physiognomy, M. de Goncourt has achieved the synthesis of the human soul. This matters far more than his pursuit of human documents, which tend to distort the whole through magnified detail rather than establish what the Naturalists pedantically call "the great inquiry." Such an approach often reduces books to mere inventories. He has tracked across this ever-shifting physiognomy its manifold and elusive expressions: he has captured the uncapturable. We know, in this mode, the truly extraordinary pages in *Madame Gervaisais*, in *Renée Mauperin*, in *La Faustin* and in *Chérie*, which have seduced countless imitators into efforts that ended in failure. This pursuit and conquest of the elusive naturally led M. de Goncourt along paths Sainte-Beuve had already traced. But M. de Goncourt has ventured incomparably further—to the ultimate boundary, I believe. Here, for the first time, we witness the writer fashioning from whole cloth "a personal language." I am aware of every objection to this enterprise of writing in a private idiom that readers must learn to properly comprehend, and I know that all such objections, to use Molière's phrase, count for nothing against *this is beautiful*, which is the verdict any enlightened sincerity must give voice to. Critics contend it robs the work of enduring clarity. But this complaint is childish when we consider that time itself forges for each century a distinctive language the next cannot grasp without study. The writer may claim any liberty, provided his particular language bows to the native genius of the tongue and to the genius of those dead languages that shaped it[73]. M. de Goncourt's language meets both demands. Through modernity, through the life of things (though placed in service to human life and physiognomy), through personal language, M. de Goncourt belongs to the new generation. He stands apart from it in his indifference to divine mysteries. One might suppose that too scrupulous an attention to details—however significant, however reflective of the whole—suppresses in him that higher imperative to marshal all mental

energies towards a single end. M. de Goncourt lacks the religious temperament. Beauty captivates and gains mastery over him primarily by piquing his curiosity, but when curiosity kneels, it does so to see better, not to worship. M. de Goncourt embodies the Modern Spirit in whom the scientific puff has already extinguished the mystical flames of Revelation without yet kindling the equally mystical fire of convictions won through science. He searches, he doubts. Perhaps he lacks even the will to believe...

M. Barbey d'Aurevilly, on the other hand, stands as the gallant defender of ancient faiths. Here is the modern mind that has kept faith with the Gospels, admitting what Science holds as opinion only when it passes Gospel scrutiny. He delights in mocking Science, daring it to explain the mysteries it can merely record. Yet he too feels the great commotion of our age, and he too, when reading faces—scarcely concerned with the arrangement of features—becomes utterly absorbed in this tragicomedy of tears and laughter. Where M. de Goncourt observes a mutual influence between social environment and physical constitution with incurious curiosity, M. Barbey d'Aurevilly sees God instead. His vision may not be surer, since he lacks due respect for Science, yet it is at least more illuminated. He knows that beyond these dense shadows lie superhuman radiances. The great drawback of this personal God is that it becomes a word spoken too soon, a word carrying above all the oppressive weight of a prohibition, a door barred against the Beyond. And this door, however magnificent and imposing, still graced with mysterious Gothic carvings, the Modern Spirit has resolved to break down, to press onward, to peer deeper into the vast forbidden Beyond. Such impiety is itself pious. Perhaps it even lends a grand mystical character to the appalling vandalism of the Revolutionary crowds. Those people had no notion what they symbolised. Theirs was the invincible, irresistible thrust of the human soul towards the God it desires, conscious or not of its desire. M. d'Aurevilly shows no mercy to this love that knows not its own name. Yet this ruthless severity has furnished him with the solid cornerstone that makes his work so commanding. From the summit of this outmoded mysticism, as if retrieved and blackened through long centuries, the Poet casts his gaze about without permitting any disturbance to affect him and, reducing all to his single thought, creates his own synthesis of the new age according to laws of ages past that still ring in his ears. He too understands the marvellous nature of things, possesses the keenest sense of modernity, holds the secret of Physiognomy and commands his own distinctive voice, one among the finest to be found in any literature. An eloquent and subtle voice, poetic, austere and impassioned. Think of carvings in an ancient wall that crumbles, whose ruined sections nevertheless stand by enchantment and will never fall. So this voice appears: dark, with sudden blazes of light that dominate. That definition of Hell—"Heaven hollowed out!"—captures its quality. Habitually excessive, cutting, brittle and wounding, this is the discourse of a sadistic dandy who knows equally how to grow languid and tender, to murmur, to smile. This voice seems always to describe, yet it almost always evokes instead. It leaves behind something like a taste, a wound, an affront, a dialogue overheard in darkness. Crimson, saffron, pearl-grey: this may be literature's most extraordinary monument. Here the voice of the Past still thunders, vexed by the Present's "Buts" and "Yets", and rather alarmed by the conclusive "Because" that the Future stands ready to pronounce.

With this great writer we conclude our consideration of those who gave rise to and shaped the new Art. We shall yet discover their influences concentrated and crystallised, and if not fully realised, then at minimum gesturing toward ventures the past could never have imagined. We can detect these now in the Poets who remain to be briefly discussed, though in truth, what have I done until now but discuss them already?

Surely no one would contest that we must take stock of all this century's greatest minds to comprehend the work of M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. In him, Mysticism and Science converge to secure the victory of the former through the latter. Fiction's fabulous virtue—though it remains, alas, tethered to time and place—nonetheless liberates it into Dreams of pure human philosophy, where science and the chosen moment serve merely as occasions, without any longer the subsidiary concern for faithful reconstruction of historical fact or meticulous description of the contemporary moment. Consummate mastery of form, far from being that accursed compact Baudelaire describes between artist and instrument, binds all Art's external resources—of a musical and plastic nature—to the immediate service of embodied thought. His horror of life's degradation, though this Poet numbers among those life has most brutally treated, finds its note of bitterness only in the irony of a luminous soul, withdrawn in advance and forever into its unshakeable certainties—an irony that turns away from evil's spectacle rather than pausing to denounce it. The sense of life's wonder, made base though its essence brims with surprise and delight, emerges both intuitive and reasoned, served by a mind sovereign in abstraction and imagination alike, the mind of a religious Thinker, a mystical Metaphysician, dedicated to magnifying the complete work of Art. The regal nobility of this mind and sensibility, curiously allied to nobility of birth, endows genius with a magnificent accent of eternally youthful pride and makes it the exceptional soul itself in love with the *Exceptional*. Every book Count Villiers de l'Isle-Adam has thus far given us portrays only beings of rare human essence, made more truly and fully human by that very rarity. — Mind and work authentically synthetic.

I should like to offer some reflections that will qualify our admiration without taking anything away from it. This irony, seeking to avert the sight of evil, which M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam brandishes —truly!—like a weapon that would prove deadly were he not generous and *Christian*, springs less from the usual source (the gulf between Life and Dream, between mankind and genius, between error and Truth) than from the particular circumstances of the age in which the Poet reaches his prime. He has repeatedly found himself compelled to deploy this irony against the presumptions of Science run mad, so intoxicated as to deny Mystery itself—a more temperate Science would have left the Poet both grave and glad. Doubtless it is also because this hour of wisdom, which will be the hour of gladness, has not yet struck that this Poet keeps his Melancholy so close to his heart. Perpetually he summons "the phantom of a mysterious woman, queen of pride, dark and fierce as the night itself, already twilit with glints of blood and gold upon her soul and beauty."[74] — Finally, we come to the Monument, the work's overarching unity. This conception may have come to him in youth as he stood on his native Breton shore contemplating his future, listening to the sacred sounds of organ and ocean. Yet the mature artist has not brought this vision to fruition, and again, perhaps for the same reason.

Naturalist influence has touched M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam only slightly, and then solely through Balzac and Flaubert. What was still-obscured irony in Flaubert has become, in Villiers, the Poet's ultimate and most refined expression of astonishment at the World's unworthiness. His chief inspirations are the Romantics and the Classics, along with Nature herself. More specifically, he turns to Chateaubriand and Goethe, to Pascal and to Shakespeare.

M. Joris-Karl Huysmans would stand utterly outside both Classicism and Romanticism were their echoes not still reverberating through Flaubert and M. de Goncourt. First seduced by Naturalism, he caught from it that dangerous malady, by which I mean, the hatred of ideas. His salvation came through a gift he shares with M. de Goncourt and M. Barbey d'Aurevilly alone, though neither of the

latter two has it to the same degree: Modernity. M. Huysmans commands the intelligence, the taste, the love—intricate, alloyed, tempered and refined by hatred—the feeling, in sum, for modern virtues and vices, for the contemporary atmosphere and cast of minds. And as Modernity embraces the whole man, M. Huysmans, to render it, has had to ascend to a comprehension of all Art. Hence, having débuted with *En Ménage* and *Les Sœurs Vatard*, he has achieved that curious *À Rebours*, where his spirit still hovers between the realities of appearance and the realities of Dream, examining the latter from within the former as a curious, invested observer who dares not declare his preferences and treats these new Beauties as oddities rather than revelations. In *En Rade* the vacillation persists: Dream and life run parallel, and Dream consists largely of dreams darkened by memories of living. Yet against that life, that execrable life, never has a Poet voiced his revulsion with such cruelty, such magnificence. Here is mortal rage, the more terrifying for its justice, the more bitter for its exclusive fixation upon objects of horror, fury and disgust. No one can long bear such inner torture, particularly if they have already tasted Beauty's consolations. And M. Huysmans frequents those literatures that strain against their boundaries and worships certain supreme artists, notably M. Gustave Moreau. On this painter, *À Rebours* contains some of M. Huysmans's finest pages, passages that wholly vindicate M. Francis Poictevin's dedication of *Derniers Songes* to J.-K. Huysmans, "that writer so penetrating and so magnificent."

Madame Judith Gautier may well be, among this generation, the soul most singularly poetic, most proud, and—beyond all passions, dwelling in her realm of dream—most tranquil. In her work too, Fiction, though it tarries in named lands at specific dates, retains nothing of history or geography. Fiction becomes the atmosphere of Beauty, and Beauty becomes the spirit's religion. I think I do not err in suggesting that this Poet's soul has room for nothing but the Dream of Beauty. And this soul, within that Dream, discovers both its joy and its creed. Must not God be that which is most beautiful? Can Truth be anything but supremely beautiful? Here, granted, we return to general ideas, yet these are scarcely ideas at all. *Le Livre de Jade* is pure graceful beauty; *Iskender* is pure beautiful form. What makes Madame Judith Gautier strike us as a more complete, more unified poet than, say, her father Théophile Gautier? She possesses in her dream greater freedom, greater intensity, greater simplicity. She reveals to us, whether knowingly or not, in those beautiful forms she cherishes, symbols of everything we most desire in charm and truth. Whether she lacks intellectual depth I cannot say: she has taken care not to let us find out.

Much that I have observed about M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam holds for M. Paul Verlaine, with this crucial distinction: prose serves as the vehicle for one, Verse for the other. Yet "in no poet do those two mighty currents that sweep the whole of modern art from Goethe and Chateaubriand to ourselves converge more decisively. At times these currents appear to diverge, but never for long: mysticism inhabits the *Fêtes Galantes*, sensualism pervades *Sagesse*. And Verlaine's modernity lies precisely in this fusion of twin inspirations. When the moment arrives to cast his thought in artistic form, the conflicting impulses of his life toward purity and toward pleasure unite in his endeavour. The intensity of this union sets him apart from all the Moderns in this respect, and he owes it surely to his raw vitality.[75]." For him, Fiction holds no appeal. He draws instead, and always, upon the eternal elements of Life itself.

"Because Verlaine embodies an intensification, an exacerbation of modern man, he has managed—consulting no documents save those of his own fate—to erect a monument of work that is both deeply personal and universal to us

all; a work that, its hero gone, will grow ever more objective and resound as the most profound cry of the modern human soul. Yet he required exactly this intensity and this simplicity to reach so splendid a goal. With only his passions for artistic material, had he been more artificial or slack, he would have merely heaped up ruins without unified design, like most of our French poets. His vital instinct rescued him—that victorious Instinct which has not simply dominated intelligence but miraculously absorbed it, spiritualising itself toward intelligence whilst materialising intelligence toward itself, realising (etymologically speaking) the Ideal, ingeniously pursuing it afterwards, without ever letting imagination be snared by any mirages save those of life itself, painted as they are by chance across the screen of our desires. The poet has certainly struggled against this law, yet ultimately he yields to it, and his life's drama has furnished the necessary painful atmosphere for his work's drama: that elemental duel of dream and life, of spirit and flesh. How this living arena of combat suffers or exults with each contestant's successive triumphs, which is to say, what constitutes the deep truth of modern sensations, how mysticism and sensualism divide between them, in our age, those souls not irrevocably claimed by pure thought's horizons. To these questions Paul Verlaine alone has provided answers[76]*."*

As with M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in tales like Akédysséril, we must note Wagnerian influence on Verlaine in poems such as Crimen Amoris. Through his remarkable Romances sans Paroles, *he burst the constraining fetters with which the Parnassians had shackled Verse. Sainte-Beuve held the seeds of this revolution. Yet how tentatively, with what paralysing anxieties he advanced, and how he neglected to conceal his working methods! Verlaine shows no such marks of labour: Poetry takes wing and casts its spell. "Verlaine might recognise himself in M. Taine's observation: 'Form seems to dissolve and vanish. I venture to say this is what defines modern poetry.' And mark this well: through his genius's bonhomie, through his simplicity's absolute sincerity, Verlaine transforms his verse into something airborne... windscattered... weightless and unposed... an art where form truly dissolves to reveal, in all the harmonies and shadings of their profound reality—almost beyond, almost despite language—those feelings or sensations evoked with such gentle-wrapped power. Thus he establishes the true distinction between verse and prose: verse being fundamentally synthetic, the musical and pictorial synthesis of what must be suggested, whilst prose, analytical save in special cases, whether symbolic or direct, breaks the object down into constituent parts.*

Verse remains Verse for Verlaine, an untouchable, quivering entity whose protective armour he learned to forge from masters of the craft like Leconte de Lisle, Banville, and Baudelaire himself. Indeed, some of the most celebrated alexandrines quoted twenty years hence will come from *Sagesse*. Yet far more audaciously than Sainte-Beuve, pursuing the same end but with keener modern sensibility, he renders verse pliant, articulate when needed, according to the shades of feeling demanded and according to new logical principles—logical in him alone. Enjambment becomes both essential and deeply harmonious, though secondary to the shifting pulse of the caesura, the alliterations marking and measuring the rhythm, the assonances that deliciously disturb the verse with minor echoes whilst rhyme's major brilliance—its horn-call glory—loses its harsh dominance, alongside those limping metres whose symmetrical asymmetry adds another harmony to this supremely artistic disorder. These techniques, deployed with a Master's unerring touch, enabled Verlaine to accomplish what Sainte-Beuve attempted but, lacking either the means or the touch, abandoned early—a poet dead in youth. In time, Verlaine's verses will command the admiration we reserve for the old masters' canvases, where we marvel to find yesterday's discoveries and tomorrow's innovations brought to perfect fruition. Like those masters, he has penetrated directly, with that innocent intuition which complete knowledge recognises as its peer, straight through to things' essential nature[77].

Messieurs Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Huysmans, and Madame Judith Gautier command prose alone. M. Verlaine writes exquisite prose, to be sure, yet verse remains his mother tongue, the medium

in which he has cast his only truly significant artistic enterprises. — One Poet wielded both prose and verse: M. Arthur Rimbaud. Within him resides, in M. Verlaine's superb phrase[78] (and we owe our knowledge of him to Verlaine) "the empire of splendid force." *Le Bateau Ivre* and *Les premières Communions*[79] stand as peerless miracles, each in its distinct genre. Absolute command of Verse's secrets, music and painting, profound metaphysics and burning life—all are his.

Then suddenly, he appeared to abandon verse for prose, creating magnificent fragments: *Les Illuminations*, *Une Saison en Enfer*. His prose is too heavily infused with the genius of his verse. What results is still verse, merely liberated from measure and rhyme, surpassing even the rhymed verses it seems to invoke. Prose and verse have not yet managed to forge the necessary alliance or unite their forces toward a single, total effect.

— This is the union M. Stéphane Mallarmé aims to accomplish**.** Concerning the work of a poet who, by his own account, stands "barred from all participation in beauty's official pageants," I shall betray no secrets. That this work remains unknown would seem to prohibit naming Monsieur Mallarmé alongside those who have delivered books to the world. We must remember not to mistake for his true work those admirable poems in verse and prose scattered through journals and reviews. They are mere provisional sketches. I leave vulgar criticism to its buzzing and observe instead that without delivering "books," M. Mallarmé has become, insofar as the word carries any meaning in our day, renowned. A renown, admittedly, not won without provoking laughter from the press both high and low—the guffaw of stupidity—or without providing public and private stupidity, whether pompously official or busily officious, the ready opportunity to parade its baseness when confronted by an approaching marvel. Yet this clamour gradually dies to a tentative murmur, half wonder, half reverence. Significantly, the younger journalists now affect to display admiration, though they are no better or worse than their elders. Unjust and insulting as this may be on their part, the shift is significant nonetheless.

What do we find here? Something perfectly natural and perfectly magnificent. Despite their present revulsion towards Beauty, and particularly towards Beauty's innovations, people have grasped, involuntarily, incrementally, the force of authentic authority. They have grown—they themselves, even they! —ashamed of their witless laughter, and confronting this man whom no laughter could disturb from his contemplative serenity, their mockery has fallen silent, yielding in turn to silence's divine contagion. Even to such people, this man who printed no books[80] of personal art yet whom everyone called "a poet" became the Poet's very emblem, one who strives to draw as near as possible to the Absolute. And for us Poets too, such is Monsieur Mallarmé. He stands as Art's living conscience, the exacting Master we long to satisfy.

I stated we must not take the published poems for his work. Through them he has demonstrated, as it were, that he could pile up books like anyone else, books that open doors to every academy and earn the tears or applause of a public, small and select though it be.[81]

Then, through his silence, he declared that along this road of an art already graced with marvels, he felt no compulsion to do more than suggest significant innovations in detail, since, given the present condition of minds, or perhaps not yet having achieved his own definitive mastery, he could not bring forth the unprecedented work of art he means to create. This deliberate abstention demands a response from us, all the more so should adverse fortune deprives the endeavour of support. Our respect, or rather our reverence, is the only fitting one.

Thus, it is through the future his printed poems hold within, through rare theoretical pieces (notably the monthly *Notes sur le Théâtre* the *Revue indépendante* ran from December 1886 to July 1887), and through conversations where listening becomes joy itself, that Monsieur Mallarmé proves to be the Poet whom the living Future seeks out above everyone else. Many ideas[82] that dwelt half-formed within us have found their life in this Poet's kindred thoughts: on Art's essential meaning and sacred office, on the true laws governing Poetry and Verse, on Theatre viewed as the supreme celebration of Art and synthesis of all the Arts, and on that vital fusion of Verse and Prose conspiring towards a single effect.

The achieved experiments in literary synthesis, or those whose design at least announces itself, would be, barring unlikely oversights, properly confined to this inventory. It seemed worthwhile to present them together, in the accompanying schema, which reveals more clearly than any commentary the bloodlines and affinities between minds.

Let me add, with an irony that pre-empts all ironies, that some degree of arbitrariness inevitably marks such a scheme, which proposes only to trace the principal outlines that particulars would fill in, outlines that preserve their truth by remaining broad.

III.

Transitions

1.

Summary. — I. Between that precious generation of the Parnassians and our own, there remains to observe the almost negligible—though curiously so—passage of those who occupy this void without filling it: transitions of feverish exhaustion, courting perpetual commotion whilst having precious little to show for it. — II. There remains also to note the solitary indulgence of certain artists who—whether rightly or wrongly I dare not say—cut themselves off from the century's momentum: perhaps they too sought the Absolute but came up short on hope. — III. There remains, finally, to conclude with depositions from several weighty witnesses.

One of the poets who came before us told me, with sincere sadness: "Call it peasant superstition if you will, but they say when storms brew before the eggs hatch, half the brood fails, and the chicks prove barren." The storm was indeed brewing as the generation of Messrs Richepin and Loti came of age.

They will leave behind nothing save the memory of vast, hazy pretensions. A conspiracy of Nothingness. Even their self-appointed labels have sunk without trace. Who now recalls the *Vivants* and the *Brutalists*? Yet through the perverse logic of things, several *occupy* what they call—and what one must call—*positions of prominence*. Every so often, some considerable abortion by M. Jean Richepin holds Paris captive for three hours at least. Or it's M. Jean Aicard collecting his annual Academy prize. Or M. Hugues tours the provinces with an entire theatrical company, parading Danton's ghastly spectre. M. Pierre Loti, whose novels command a delightful if picturesque following—nervous women who see themselves in *Rarahu*, superannuated naval officers who exclaim of exotic landscapes "Spot on!", and those innocent boulevardiers who champion a novelist as they would vouch for their confectioner—M. Pierre Loti troubles only his senior, M. Alphonse Daudet. Were they in better spirits, they might strike a bargain: one trades in the perverse and byzantine, the ultra-Parisian and achingly modern; the other has given Florian's pastoral straw a makeover (in seaweed, no less—how ingenious!). Both write with comparable ineptitude. Both possess minds equally barren of profound thought or noble conception, whilst boasting considerable worldliness and proven insight into public taste. Indeed, I should rather enjoy watching these shrewd operators join forces, batting between them—like a rubber ball that chimes gold at every bounce—this contemporary public which deserves no better. One would drug them with his intoxicating *parisine*, the other would revive them in salt baths amongst the pungent kelp. One would play the metropolis, the other the holiday resort. Or should one bludgeon them to death with laughter at Tarascon or in the Alps, the other would restore their equanimity with his broad vistas and "innocent folk tales". Who could possibly complain about such an arrangement?[83]

What a sorry lot! For it truly is pathetic to watch them scramble through their careers, scavenging fragments of originality from sundry imitations. M. Richepin exemplifies the type perfectly.

Whom does he ape initially? Villon, Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, M. de Banville, and does so with consummate facility and a swaggering air that tickles the bourgeois, who, unwittingly heeding divine wisdom, relishes being held in contempt. On he goes. Then who? Victor Hugo again, now with Lucretius and Messrs Leconte de Lisle, Coppée and Verlaine thrown in. The early imitations date from his bohemian phase; the later ones from his atheist incarnation. But today this mania for becoming someone else in order to become *someone* has turned pathetic. Having caught the prevailing wind, M. Richepin—yes, the atheist himself!—has gone mystical! He has cottoned on that the rising generations burn for origins and endings, that they crave mystery. He has ransacked his soul. Lo and behold, he shares these passions and cravings, just like us! Some months back, I chanced upon his verses in a journal: they were trite, yet mystical! Bloated in form, threadbare in content, yet mystical! I hear he has just penned *Le Mage*, an opera libretto. Hedging his bets, you might think—no, it's too calculated, mere vacant ambition. A pity, really, for with greater humility M. Richepin might have produced decent work. *Madame André* contains some splendid passages. *La Chanson des Gueux* offers merry and peculiar refrains, though their coarseness nearly always grates. Good grief! This manufacturer of hefty tomes is nothing but an intimist and ballad-monger whom the École Normale has corrupted with rhetoric and delusions of grandeur!

This is their stamp, almost to a man: they nurse ambitions that might pass for generous but prove equally absurd, hurling themselves at doors already flung wide. Thus proceeds M. Bergerat, trumpeting the new and the bold whilst devoutly mimicking the established masters. Thus proceeds M. Montégut, who invokes the public over masterpieces spurned by some Director or other—spurned, mind you, just as you or I would have done. M. Maurice Rollinat emerges as the most intriguing casualty of this unfortunate moment. Here is a musician of strange originality, a painter too of genuine, intuitive feeling for nature—those deep plains where the eye loses itself in visions of infinity, those sorrowful houses with their sorrowful tenants, the troubling ordinariness of farmstead and grange, the mired and vicious world in miniature of the pond, its frogs and toads. Amongst such creatures, such things and plain folk, M. Rollinat found his poetry. Paris was his undoing. This poet of simple gifts sought sophistication there, and since simplicity was his lifeblood, sophistication proved his death—hence *Les Névroses*. With remarkable dignity, M. Rollinat abruptly turned his back on a fame he knew to be hollow, a fame that stands as one of the most bewildering reversals of public taste and surest indicators of the work's essential poverty. He retreated to his rustic province yet returned transformed into psychologist and moralist. Parisian gaslight had scorched those once keen and guileless eyes...

I will pass over several others. Let us accord a place of honour to M. Chantavoine, whose bitter sensibility remains, for all that, humane and genuine. Yet none rises above the rest. Messrs Valabrègue, Blémont, Arène[84] aren't wanting in application: they execute admirably what everyone has executed before them. To what end? Their motto appears to be, unflinchingly: "No innovations!" The Frémines, Grandmougins, Goudeaus, Lafenestres, Lemaîtres[85], Pigeons, Tiercelins, and so forth, and so forth! guard against innovation with equal vigilance. Their boldest departure, when they hazard one, is to sally forth, as on a sortie, to "apply" Parnassian precepts to scenes and physiognomies beyond the Parisian pale. The very blueprint of these minor geographical forays offends against Art's true nature, which recognises but two native grounds: the soul and the ether, being spirit's wing, and knows but one duration, eternity. Still, it remains M. Gabriel Marc's modest achievement to have faithfully transcribed Auvergne and its natives. It remains M. Gabriel Vicaire's modest achievement to have laid before us certain Bressan vistas and hostelries[86]. We have, too, the Provençal literature and the Félibres—those

counterfeit naïfs, artfully artless, composing in a tongue both academic and extinct. They persist still[87]. The author of *Émaux Bressans* boasts another distinction—impossible to overlook! Together with that excellent fellow M. Beauclair, M. Vicaire—styling himself "Adoré Floupette" for the enterprise—lampooned in *Les Déliquescences* the "extravagances" of the Décadents. The piece brims with wit. One hardly dares fault it for providing journalists with their laugh. Mind you, at Poets' expense, when all's said and done, though that is its real import, which perhaps not everyone has grasped, or cares to grasp. My conclusion: Here stands a spokesman for a generation that has produced nothing original, that either ignores its immediate forebears (those we actually attend to) or apes them servilely, that has let the vital chain of tradition snap. Confronted with the Young guard struggling to mend that chain and fulfill their poetic calling—to forge the new "though the world be emptied of it"—he sees only what might seem puerile in this splendid endeavour and offers only mockery. In truth, had these Young ones possessed the leisure to pay back our wag in kind, they would have found themselves at sea. Parody requires an object, and I challenge M. Vicaire and M. Ponchon, for all their cleverness, to parody even one of their immediate contemporaries.

All this will strike some as unduly severe, intemperate even. But perspective shifts when we remember that younger brothers call their elders to account for the patrimony. The elders have allowed it to moulder through negligence. The younger brothers protest, and rightly, for the crown of the work would weigh less heavily had the ground not been abandoned to weeds...

I overstate the case. Some have laboured, M. Bourget being one of them, through his early novels (and alongside or after him, all who have advanced the psychological novel) and through his verse. We might add M. Bouchor to their number. They will leave their mark.

M. Bouchor began badly, with pieces in the crude and buffoonish taste of his friends Messrs Richepin and Ponchon. Hence his immediate and considerable "success". But the higher he climbed, the further success receded. The *Poèmes de l'Amour et de la Mer* claim a hundred readers, *L'Aurore* perhaps twenty, the *Symboles* none whatsoever—an excellent sign. Irony, and of the saddest kind! Just as M. Vicaire would mock the young poets still *groping* their way, so M. Bouchor mocked those elders who had *found* theirs, and both men, mark you, did so not through rational prose argument or doctrine, but in verse itself. M. Bouchor's punishment? As he improves daily, he daily grows more like those he once derided. Indeed, he overshoots the mark. Where once he merely laughed, thought now holds him captive. The artist suffers for it, and already in the *Symboles* one repeatedly asks: why verse at all? and recalls M. Sully-Prudhomme's rhymed prose[88]. M. Bouchor's signal virtue, the very reason we cherish him, is his responsiveness to that profound voice urging the Poet, in our age, to remember the most ancient teachings, to heed the immemorial wisdom of the first Magi, to peer into the depths of antique Metaphysics and Religions. Alas, without faith, all threatens to remain barren—Art and Philosophy alike. The verses, learned but cold, refuse to sing; the thoughts, bent on negation, cannot create. Want of faith—here lies what makes this once excessively merry soul now excessively melancholy. He lacks faith in those very religions he celebrates, which from the dawn of time form but one Religion evolving with humanity itself. He dwells on successive errors that were, each in its season, truths. He lacks faith in his artistic instrument, in this Verse he overworks, in this Rhyme that neither guides nor sustains him... M. Bouchor's spiritual journey remains incomplete. Besides, young as he is, he belongs to this generation through early associations rather than age.

M. Bourget has traced an arc through literature. Starting from authentic springs—Balzac, Baudelaire, Stendhal—toward the proper destination, he suddenly swerved, not backwards, but astray, down those dreary paths haunted by fatigue and compromise, toward unwholesome regions ruled by Messrs Daudet and Loti. — Of this lamentable conversion, no more need be said; let us recall his former distinction. — M. Bourget's voice has ever been faint, yet true, aristocratic, penetrating. In his verses[89], nearly all deliciously Lakist, he diluted Baudelaire's grand dark beauty—that death-rattle shriek! —into the plaint of a soul where intellect smothers feeling. In doing so, he discovered how to remain a poet through somewhat neutral psychology, more anxious than anguished. His stories and early novels marked a reaction against rabid Naturalism, whilst preserving certain merits, for "the delicate idealisation with which he aureoles his women does not render them unreal"[90]. — Granted, M. Bourget lacked the requisite force to wrench art from a path it needed to traverse but not inhabit, back onto the highway that truly leads to Synthesis. That demanded a more metaphysical mind, more buoyant imagination, sensibility unencumbered by petty irritations. Yet what he could and should accomplish, M. Bourget accomplished. He revisited Balzac, especially Stendhal, M. Feuillet too, and against novelists who recognised only creatures of raw sensation, he set creatures driven by sentiment. Here, *Deuxième Amour* stands as masterwork. But M. Bourget's cardinal error, prompted I suspect by his delicately sensual, excessively plaintive, even pampered nature, was permitting the brute melancholy of fleshly novels to infiltrate his novels of spirit. He has contributed his quota to the "grand inquest". Like others, he chronicles contemporary mores, and with him as with all, fiction's "noble falsehood" merely enables "truthful details". A fait divers he prefers refined where others prefer it coarse—negligible difference. Exquisite poet and novelist, M. Bourget remains a critic of real consequence, admirably schooled by Sainte-Beuve and M. Taine, with works to show for it.

Another critic has versified. I have assessed M. Lemaître's verses: they surpass the tender Sully-Prudhomme he mimics only through mimicking Théophile Gautier too. His criticism proves highly refined, highly intelligent, highly *normalien* and highly unqualified. — Did he not cavil at M. Paul Verlaine over grammar? I concede, regrettably, that M. Lemaître writes correctly, commands respectable general intelligence, possesses all that instruction provides. Yet I seek his critical principle and discover it neither in masterworks he hasn't produced, nor in doctrine he surely doesn't claim to have established. I can acknowledge him only as M. Sarcey's pupil, rival, or heir, and, bluntly stated, the Dilettante-Critic.

A third critic demands more of our attention: M. Gabriel Sarrazin. I should properly place him amongst the new generation, were he not linked through early connections to its predecessor. Free from academic or other affectations, M. Sarrazin possesses strength through faith. Throughout his studies *Les Poètes modernes de l'Angleterre*, throughout his new volume (*La Renaissance de la Poésie anglaise*), one feels at every turn a man who worships and comprehends Beauty. Through these works of learning, discernment and integrity, he has rendered Literature invaluable service.

Round M. Bourget, though he is no captain to them, rather gathered through shared tendencies, let us assemble those novelists half-idealist, half-naturalist like himself. M. Mirbeau, gifted with passionate force and genuine, elevated devotion to Letters, Messrs de Bonnières, Pouvillon, Dodillon, Hervieux, Lavedan, Caze, all craft sincere, studious works whose sole reproach is tarrying in transitional territory. — M. Harry Alis, working naturalism leavened with irony, gives us the faultless *Petite Ville*. — Standing apart, I would cite M. Elémir Bourges (*Le Crépuscule des Dieux* proves a Poet's splendid

achievement), M. Pinard, whose *Madame X* betrays a remarkably peculiar psychological bent, M. Blondel, whose *Le Bonheur d'aimer* I prize for its tender, authentically sentimental melancholy, and M. Léon Bloy, pamphleteer[91] and novelist who makes novels of pamphlets and pamphlets of novels. Here is another writer pledged to the Church who horrifies the Church. Such men rattle her dying hours when she'd rather drift off to elderly women's whispers… I marvel at M. Bloy's inexhaustible vituperation. He reigns as Master of Invective. Nothing astounds like his adverbs. Yet I unreservedly admire certain singular passages on historical Symbolism in the *Désespéré*.

2.

The country I am entering is the strangest on earth. From a distance, glimpsed through mists, it seems warm and pale. Yet draw closer and you will discover it lies under the fiercest sun—though that sun sheds no light. From afar, you would swear it was the realm of rest and indifference but look more carefully and you will see a hub of terrible activity—though what drives this activity defies comprehension. People rush about, urgent and eager, their smiles worn like masks. They visit the fields but return with neither fruit nor flower. They brush against everything, grasp nothing. They worship by turns at Jupiter-Ammon's temple and Christ's church. Faithless, they immerse themselves in studies that only Faith can justify or make fruitful. One moment you would swear they were ascetics and Church Fathers, knowing as much theology as Origen or Aquinas, but wait, and you will hear them 'explain' ecstasy as hypnotism, miracles as hallucination! They are charming company, and from the most distant realms—Pure Thought, Science, Poetry, Action. Kings and captains journey here for the pleasure of meeting these nobodies without titles or achievements who are nothing yet possess an uncanny gift for drawing out the best in everyone. Still, beneath their eternally placid smiles, they are not happy. Perhaps they secretly long to create something themselves, but their hearts harbour such a tangle of contradictory affirmations and negations, all frozen in place, that they are doomed to eternal paralysis —Buridan's ass incarnate! Perhaps they secretly long to engage with life, to become fully human, but *Dilettantism* holds them captive. They are the *Dilettanti*.

Let me correct that: they do create. But *what they create is contradiction itself*. They cannot address the same subject twice without reversing themselves—yes becomes no, black becomes white. Should they write a book, it proves such a parade of blatant contradictions that readers wonder: is this mockery or madness? Yet the dilettante appears utterly sincere, and each particular judgement, taken alone, seems perfectly sound. No, the Dilettante is deeply sincere and deeply wise—too wise, in fact, not to see both sides of every question with equal clarity, and too sincere not to articulate everything he sees. If he swings back to affirming what he has just denied, it's because he has stumbled upon some fresh argument for affirmation along the way. He won't dream, however, of erasing his negation, suspecting that round the next corner lurks irrefutable proof that denial was the wiser course all along.

Dilettantism is—to borrow their jargon!—the anaesthesia of creative power through hypertrophy of receptive understanding. In religion and philosophy, it means death and void; in art, it's both supreme danger and vital safeguard. Faithless, the dilettante remains sterile, and that superior smile playing on the lips of someone whose every look, gesture and word radiates extraordinary intelligence has a chilling effect on others' creativity. Yet without prejudice, he achieves justice. Where

the man of aesthetic action, swept along by passion and the natural bent of his genius, rushes to praise or damn, the dilettante weighs intention against accident, enters caveats of taste, and suspends judgement. For genius, dilettantism represents an alluring form of death. It's the abyss that beckons those who sense the gulf between their vision and their power to realise it, and who drift towards it half-willingly. Though dilettanti appear to savour every pleasure equally, they suffer more than most, paralysed by choice. Their affliction is, quintessentially, Ennui in evening dress.

Dilettantism dissolves overripe societies more effectively than any critical spirit with which it's sometimes confused. The confusion likely arises because they share nothing at all, and because we have invented that splendid nonsense: the Dilettante Critic—the critic who judges works through the prism of shifting, rootless preferences. True Criticism, which demands a mind anchored in unchanging principles[92], stands at the polar opposite of dilettantism.

This is, I tell you, the disease that marks the twilight of civilisation, and I can think of almost no one today who has escaped infection. In some it declares itself openly, violently. Nearly everyone in that generation I accused of idleness could retort by pointing to their footprints across this strange, melancholy territory. M. Mendès passed through it some time ago. But one monarch rules this land: M. Ernest Renan

I'm not here to assess M. Renan's philosophical and religious oeuvre. Yet since I cannot divorce substance from style, I marvel endlessly at how this language—woven from air, crystalline and weightless, the most *transparent* imaginable—can clothe such murky, duplicitous thoughts, so ponderous and evasive, this conviction forever slipping through one's fingers, this faith riddled with doubt, this doubt shot through with faith—or rather, this doubting faith and this believing doubt. The chasm between form and content strikes me as unnatural, troubling, allowing thought such unexpected reversals, such latitude for manoeuvre. With M. Renan, the style—rich but never ostentatious—hovers around ideas that are simultaneously lucid and perverse. It has the comfortable ease of a worldly prelate wearing his sombre vestments without undue solemnity, and with wit so refined, so devilishly refined!, he casts the charms of his prose like sand in our eyes, smuggling in under cover of this dazzling display notions we don't immediately detect in our enchantment. Or else, having established some unassailable truth in straightforward terms, showing it from an angle that delights with its novelty, he veers off on a tangent through some parenthetical remark, leading us down uncertain paths we would never have followed without the trust he has cultivated. But at the end of the journey, at the precipice where logic and our own impatience should have driven him, he wheels round serenely—his smile phosphorescent with irony—and retraces his steps to our starting point. There he pauses to let us catch our breath, then recaptures our flagging confidence, dazzling and soothing it at once. He works deeper into our trust through displays of bottomless erudition matched by apparently bottomless sincerity, until suddenly, through what I can only call sleight-of-hand wedded to genius, he spirits us down that second path. This one is darker and more treacherous than the first, yet he smooths it, illuminates it, teaches us to love it—only to strand us there, as before, in supreme doubt where he appears to triumph. Yet he styles himself, and we are prepared to accept him as, a believer.

M. Anatole France too calls himself a believer, if we credit his poetry, but his prose breathes scepticism. Such are the contradictions of Dilettantism! And here the case grows particularly intriguing. The subjects that seduce M. France the poet—*Les Noces Corinthiennes*, for instance, or that *Leuconoë*, so magnificent in certain passages that it bears comparison only with itself—are mystical, and he handles

them with what seems wonderfully authentic mystical feeling. But let him turn to Saint Anthony in prose, and he will show us in that near-divine visionary—that genius of early Christianity who established countless monastic orders and gave them a Rule we still admire for its wisdom and rigour—nothing but a clinical case. For him, Mysticism becomes merely a nervous complaint. What are we to make of this? Was the beautiful poem just a parlour game? Clearly M. France withholds himself from his work. Art remains for him merely a splendid diversion. He is, in a word, a dilettante.

Dilettantism possesses a faint afterglow of certain virtues. It lacks pride. It cherishes the past, leaves the present unmolested, doesn't tyrannise the future. Sometimes we need its help to achieve perfect justice—to appreciate with equal sympathy minds opposed to each other or resistant to our own convictions. Consider M. Vacquerie, whose *Formosa* I mentioned among those dramatic works that pierce the darkness of contemporary theatre with welcome shafts of light. Or Madame Ackermann, an atheist who, though otherwise talentless, touched genius for one brief instant. Or M. Hello, that Christian philosopher one often admires but who sometimes exasperates through "excesses of sincerity" that cloud his vision, exhaust the reader, and force one to close the book. We need this borrowed dilettantism to appreciate M. Octave Feuillet for one fine book (*M. de Camors*), M. Droz for similar reasons (*Babolain*), M. Hector Malot for his early novels, M. Fabre for his penetrating studies of clerical life, and M. Theuriet not only for his charming feeling for nature but perhaps also for the soothing worldview in his works—those epic dialogues between Town and Country, with rustic lovers and city-dwelling beloveds, yielding piercing dramas of love thwarted by conflicting allegiances.

3.

M. Taine's thought has been my constant companion throughout this journey. Though only obliquely connected to our thoroughly modern artistic evolution, absorbed as he is now, to our great loss, in historical studies, this admirable mind has watched with the keenest eye of all observers those earlier movements which were destined to carry Art towards the supreme conclusions we now sense within reach. He has witnessed the human mind embarking upon the paths of metaphysical mysticism, venturing "into abstraction, dream and symbol," growing ever "more capable of abstraction" whilst proving itself worthy of an increasingly fluid ideal of Beauty, expanding at once in both conception and expression.

"*Does not every living creature in this world share a common nature? Certainly, each thing possesses a soul. The universe itself has one. Whatever the being—brute or thinking, distinct or nebulous—a secret essence always gleams beyond its sensible form, something divine we glimpse in sublime flashes yet never grasp or penetrate. Here lies the presentiment and yearning that lift all modern poetry skyward, now through Christian meditations, as in Campbell and Wordsworth, now through pagan visions, as in Keats and Shelley. They hear the great heart of nature beating; they long to reach it; they explore every avenue, spiritual or sensible—the way of Judaea and the way of Greece, the path of hallowed dogma and that of forbidden doctrine. In this magnificent, impossible quest, the greatest spend themselves and perish. The poetry they carry with them along these sublime roads comes apart at the seams.*"

So speaks Monsieur Taine. For all the menace in those closing lines, his admiration and allegiance remain unmistakable. Meanwhile, a most circumspect critic—admittedly somewhat confined

by his singular perspective—surveys from the heights of a century's teaching and tradition, whose very grandeur leaves him disenchanted with any prospect of the future, and passes severe judgement on these new endeavours, bracing himself against the fortunate and inexorable tide carrying our age towards the ultimate apotheosis of Integral Art.

I respect M. Brunetière's unquestionable sincerity. I cherish the matchless masters of the seventeenth century as deeply as he does. Yet I am convinced that they themselves would have been innovators in our time, just as they were in their own. Moreover, I believe M. Brunetière's resistance serves a purpose. How providential that a voice of his authority should regularly summon—however sternly—our youthful aspirations back to reverence for ancient beliefs, to cherishing what remains vital and generative within them.

In a third critic, Count Melchior de Vogüé—a writer to the manner born, traditional in principle yet modern in sensibility—reverence for the past and hunger for the future find their meeting ground. M. de Vogüé was introduced early to Russia through circumstances of fortune. There he encountered a young nation closer than our own to the Orient, yet one that had welcomed Western influence since the mid-eighteenth century. He has brought home from Russia a magnificent literature—the fruit of that grafted Western influence and indigenous Russian youth. It is a literature both bitter and tender, innocent yet intricate, spiritual and sensual at once. It blazes with love exalted into charity, yet remains fierce in all its gentleness. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy—sharp-etched figures whose influence ripples outward, growing fainter yet more particular. This is Russian Literature. Young French Literature embraced it as a kindred spirit, recognising in it the fulfilment of certain distant longings, whilst drawing from it a salutary lesson in simplicity and force.

Finally, a most remarkable spirit—utterly distinctive, possessed of exquisite subtlety and penetrating insight. An artist besotted with life, yet one for whom the Plastic Arts reveal themselves as life's most potent expression. He offers invaluable witness in the name of Art. If M. Jean Dolent never became a painter himself, despite gifts peculiarly suited to grasping pictorial Beauty, it is because "the painter sees only within" and he holds that "amongst those who observe, some must truly observe and see." Yet this *Devotee of art*, who beholds life through the transfiguring lens of great paintings, has distilled certainties from his ceaseless contemplation. These have shifted considerably over time, he admits[93]. All to the good: such fluctuations attest to his integrity. His conclusions, strikingly, chime with our own: "*What seizes me most forcefully is the work in which the artist carries me beyond his apparent stopping-point*... My ideal: Truths invested with the enchantment of Dream."[94]

Note

This book might well close here. I have addressed Past and Present. I could trust the reader's insight to discern the Future. I have given pride of place to the representatives of the Past[95] to show how the modern spirit proceeds through Analysis. It decomposes the human compound, studying in turn: the Soul in its passions, ideally distinct from temperament; then Feeling in the movements of that impassioned Soul; and finally, Sensation. I have then indicated how, after this immense labour, the modern spirit seeks through Synthesis to reconstruct what Analysis had sundered. This attempt remains incomplete. It is the very task of the *Littérature de Tout à l'heure*.

At the turn of the century, we witnessed two geniuses—Goethe and Chateaubriand—rising like the negative and positive poles of Thought: Science and Mysticism. Then come spirits one dare not call secondary, yet who are not the stars of first magnitude in this century's firmament. They apply the laws of passional psychology to living beings and discover human truth. They ennoble Art, which is to become religious. They restore majesty to the instrument of Poetry—the Verse. They conceive the notion of the Literary Monument and foresee conscience joining with inspiration to govern and fortify it. They recover a poetry of primordial man, intimate with the heart of nature, whose silent language again becomes legible to them. They locate the human refuge within man himself, in his interior life. They unveil the marvellous aspect, the metaphysical expression of this interior life that doubles upon itself. They return to the simplicity of legends whilst sustaining verse in its lyrical element and rendering it fitter to carry thoughts transmuted into ideas. Victor Hugo, that clearing house of all innovations, adding nothing of his own, lends them the force of law. Balzac and Wagner, the twin luminaries of the century, restore fundamental Art to its natural wellsprings through Science, emancipate formal Art by identifying Fiction as its essential element, establish the principle of compositional unity, lay the bedrock of reality for the artwork of the future, achieve the union of all artistic forms governed by Action, synthesise observations and experiences within Fiction, and fuse mysticism with sensualism through artistic expression. Poe and Baudelaire establish as dogmas two truths that shall brook no heretics amongst true poets: conscious and concentrated genius, and the lyrical sense of Science. They prohibit abandoning anything to chance in artistic work. They prescribe for Beauty a singular melancholy, logical and magnificent. They express the inexpressible and demonstrate how poetry can embrace psychology by exaggerating the "mysterious, satanic, horrible, and anguishing features of the soul whilst almost refraining from describing them, thereby magnifying them and allowing their sombre and splendid terror its full weight"[96]. Through their very example, they prove that true poetry is the Ideal. They institute in art the fundamental notion of the Exceptional and discover modern verse. With Flaubert and M. Leconte de Lisle, they stand as the final sentinels of that sorrowful vigil preceding the joyous feast of Art, master at last of all its powers. Flaubert establishes the prose of general ideas. Sainte-Beuve invents, for expressing the shadings of sentiment, the principle of personal language. M. Leconte de Lisle, like Flaubert in prose, establishes the verse-language of general ideas; like Flaubert too, sounds the return to Origins, and both, through their plaint more intense yet aesthetically finer than their predecessors', inaugurate consolation through Beauty, germ of an aesthetic religion. M. Théodore de Banville restores Art's authentic character, which is Joy; assigns Poetry its law in the Ode and its governor in Rhyme; first articulates that Theatre is merely the Ode in dialogue. Messrs de

Goncourt and Barbey d'Aurevilly, each distinctively—beyond personal language, attained by both—examine Modernity through Physiognomy: the latter through art serving Catholic religion, the former through art independent of all religion.

The *Littérature de Tout à l'heure* is synthetic. It aspires to *evoke the whole man through the whole of Art.* Now this Synthesis stands more than half-achieved through the efforts I have summarised. It stands wholly achieved if to these efforts we join those of these Poets: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé.[97]

Yet perhaps one desires to know how the new generation, these latest arrivals, propose in turn to advance the Great Work.

This I shall outline as concisely as possible.

New Influences

What remains to be done is trifling compared to the immense labour already achieved. Yet this last step—ever the hardest to take—demands tranquillity and conviction. If the new artists appear less assiduous than their forebears, we must consider whether present circumstances favour artistic endeavour as much as those of old. Before bringing to light for our seldom-seen reader what we are creating, then, let us first illuminate how we create it, and what influences vex or ease our labours...

The challenge before us: to squeeze an entire volume into scarcely more than a few paragraphs.

Let me dispatch the social influences at once, if only to clear them from our path, though they do signify. We must acknowledge the perpetual spectre of war, the petty torments of universal militarism, the necessity of breaking off mid-hemistich to fulfill "one's twenty-eight days of military instruction". We must reckon with the tumults of the street as well, for the creaking governmental machinery has never produced such din with its endless parade of newspapers, elections, and ministerial upheavals. Add to this that the raucous despotism of commerce has expelled Beauty from the public mind, while industry[98] has slaughtered whatever silence politics might have spared. Consider how our present age appears when viewed from these various perspectives and set against the Restoration, the July Monarchy, or the Second Empire.

As for moral influences, I distil them all to the temptation of "Success." I speak not of Glory—that conception has vanished from the earth. I should hardly venture to say "fame."

What we call Success now yields merely Notoriety, a grotesque phenomenon and an equally grotesque term, though Success once signified the coinage of glory and is scarcely French in its current usage. Yet this is all that remains to us, and besides notoriety brings wealth, honours, pleasures of every stripe if it finds one still in the radiant flush of youth, and so forth. But who enjoyed glory under the Restoration? Chateaubriand, Lamartine... Under the July Monarchy? Victor Hugo... Under the Second Empire, who commanded fame? Gautier, Sainte-Beuve... During the early years of the Third Republic? Messieurs de Goncourt, Leconte de Lisle, Zola... And in our present day, who can claim to possess notoriety? Messieurs Daudet, Ohnet...

Beyond this outward clamour, which the Poet may escape by forging sanctuary within his soul through sheer volition, and beyond this pleasant slide towards mediocrity, which his adamantine devotion to Beauty empowers him to resist, there remain the sentimental and intellectual influences, graver and more pressing still. These divide naturally into the religious and philosophical, the scientific and artistic.

Since religion fled the churches, it roams the streets. Not long ago, Montmartre boasted a Catholic brasserie where sacred verse was declaimed. There are nocturnal hours when the Boulevard grows mystical. It grows pessimistic too. None of which prevents it from becoming deliriously merry at other hours, deeper into the night. And these are the very same young gentlemen, elegant and robust—almost to a man—who are by turns mystical, pessimistic and merry, occasionally all at once. In matters of religious and philosophical doctrine, precious few amongst these youths possess any rigorous understanding.

From the liturgy they retain splendid vocables: monstrance, ciborium, and suchlike. Some preserve from Spencer, Mill, Schopenhauer, Comte, Darwin, a smattering of terminology. How rare are

those who truly grasp their subject, who seek not to brandish and parade a discourse whose sole virtue lies in its pompous syllables and fashionable archaisms. Rarer still are those who penetrate to the core, who have immersed themselves in these theologies and metaphysics and made them the foundation of their thought, the sustenance of their ideas, the firm and coherent fabric of their aesthetic expression. Nevertheless, all submit to this dual influence, both the trivial and the profound alike. It is an influence ancient as humanity itself, yet never before raised to such a pitch, it would seem. I speak of the influence of Mysticism and Philosophy.

Science and Its Claims. Once upon a time, Art and Science dwelt in worlds apart from one another, and if by rare chance an artist like Leonardo happened also to be a scientist, neither pursuit ever encroached upon or corrupted the other. Then the eighteenth century came and muddled everything, drawing the two poles closer together. Yet Art still reigned supreme, treating Science as nothing more than its lady's maid. One thinks of Buffon lending his lace cuffs to Nature. Today the tables have turned. Caught in the strange confusion born of colliding formulas and the formidable obstacles that stand between the artist and the consummate work of art, Art has shed its old disdain for Science, and the Artist now eagerly seeks the advice of the Scientist. Science has exploited this opening to colonise Art, Literature especially. Literary criticism finds itself rather patronised by its scientific counterpart. Some would have us believe that scientists' conclusions and their most intriguing experiments[99] in the science of tones and colours will eventually do away with the perilous caprices of instinct.

I find this unconvincing and regard the artist's submission to any laws save those of instinct tempered by conscience as far more perilous than all the hazards of intuition. What could be more dispiriting for Art, more demeaning, than to think the scientist might gauge a work of genius with his sightless compass and render his definitive and irrevocable judgment, branding it either Beautiful or Ugly? When Raffaëlli observes that geometric forms are "*preemptively fixed and cannot accommodate the boundless diversity of individual temperaments*", he offers a principle I would readily apply to those scientific systems that presume to measure artistic beauty. For "*art begins where passion begins*," and here we discover the very threshold beyond which geometry cannot venture.

These scientific anxieties, these assurances from scientist to poet of immunity from error, prove especially unsettling at this particular moment, when Literature finds itself moved by a conspicuous tendency in the visual arts towards synthesising all arts within each individual art. Recognising in this vision its own deepest yearnings, Literature wonders whether accepting science in its role as a source of support might not be the wiser course...

— I needn't revisit Wagner, whose musical drama I have already shown to unite all artistic forms. The entirety of modern French music, to keep to this single point (César Franck, Ernest Réyer, Saint-Saëns, and Massenet in his early works), takes Wagner as its starting point, following with varying success the traditions he founded, responding with varying fidelity to his momentum. Yet long before Wagner arrived on the scene, music had already begun to intuit that its destiny lay in union with Poetry. Music's very nature, virtually indistinguishable from pure sensation, makes it the mother of dreams. When Berlioz worked to appropriate for himself something of the power native to painting, when Wagner yoked music to dramatic Action, each merely intensified and made conscious this inherent suggestive force.

In an article on the new literature, M. Brunetière observes how architecture, painting and music have successively held sway over literature, setting its tone and furnishing its ideal. The Classicists, intent on expressing the very soul, would have preferred architecture—that noble, spiritual art which makes use of the senses as sparingly as possible. The Romantics, captivated by the picturesque, and the Naturalists by the external face of things, would naturally have gravitated towards painting. Indeed, it's striking that two painters, Courbet and Manet, inaugurated the naturalist movement. Finally, the Decadents or Symbolists, who arrived to articulate the inner essence of beings and things, would salute music as the art lying nearest to their cherished ideal. M. Brunetière makes the observation that most decadent verse collections bear titles borrowed from the musical lexicon, among them Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles*, Laforgue's *Complaintes*, and Moréas's *Cantilènes*.

There's considerable truth in this scheme, though I believe it contains its share of the arbitrary. For one thing, architecture, itself a miraculous synthesis of the Arts, is, depending on its various 'orders', as willingly sensual and sentimental as it is spiritual. Furthermore, it strikes me that the Classicists were no more particularly drawn to architecture than to any other art. All that M. Brunetière says about Romantic and Naturalist predilections for painting rings historically true. Yet I would have him consider this: the new poets do indeed passionately cherish the art of beautiful sounds, but this has not caused them to forsake the art of beautiful colours.

True, Verlaine in his art poétique enjoins "*music above all else*", yet he also expressly champions "*nuance*". And whilst the title *Romances sans paroles* would seem to reinforce M. Brunetière's theory, it would be undermined by numerous pieces within that very collection that evoke paintings, as well as by the *Eaux-fortes* and *Paysages tristes* in the *Poèmes Saturniens*. If Moréas penned *Cantilènes*, Poictevin penned *Paysages*, and Moréas himself wrote *Les Syrtes* and is preparing *Iconostases*. De Régnier gave us *Sites*. Yet these piecemeal arguments carry little weight either way.

More telling observations. I freely concede that music is indeed the art which, after poetry itself, affords certain poets of this hour their most intense pleasures, though significantly this comes at a moment when music itself has drawn nearer to poetry generally and to painting particularly. Poetry appears to have grasped music at the very instant music appears to have grasped poetry. Might they not share a common ideal, one that each finds its particular means inadequate to attain?

And consider this besides: it's the loftiest, purest, most *lyrical* music we cherish. Towards Meyerbeer and Rossini we display the cool detachment shown by the Romantics, and I know scarcely anyone amongst us who waxes enthusiastic over Gounod. What we worship in Bach, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Schumann, Berlioz and Wagner corresponds exactly to what we worship in our beloved poets, just as it does to what we admire in Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Besnard, Odilon Redon, Eugène Carrière, Cazin, Rapin, Monticelli, and the Primitives. This same quality is what certain other poets of this hour savour in these painters even more profoundly than in these musicians. In truth, these three distinct appearances are but different embodiments of the same ideal.

Moreover, if Music enthrals us more profoundly and universally than Painting, it's because the former is at once more remote and more intimate, in greater proximity to the wellspring and terminus of feelings and sensations than the latter. Line and colour fix themselves and defy time, whereas sound, barely breathed forth, surrenders to it. It lives through dying, and therein lies a magnificent symbol. Yet it transcends itself, penetrating silence to its innermost sanctuaries and rousing the echo there. It remains ever a summons towards something unknown, something mysterious—an exhalation, an

effusion of the soul. And all returns to it. This ephemeral thing voices eternity and in doing so becomes the measure for things of grander ambition. It is by this measure that a painting achieves harmony and a poem achieves melody. Where Painting bears witness to reality, Music aspires beyond it. Through music the soul takes wing from itself and recovers self-awareness in the solid silence of painting.

Now, in these very days, inheritors of so many bygone days, does it not appear that human genius aches with an immense longing to flee itself? *Anywhere out of the world!* This cry belongs to our age, and it's far more than a cry: it's the supreme law of Supreme Art. This "beyond the world"—meaning "beyond space and time"—conjures the perfect theatre where Fiction, at last worthy of its name, shall disport itself, fiction truly fashioned by man and recalling nothing of this place. Yet it is music alone that can make such a leap beyond earthly boundaries—music, that spiritual illumination which, revealing nothing, makes all things visible.

It voices both the ultimate yearnings of an aged humanity, weary of existence and the changeless horizon, straining towards infinity, whilst offering this same humanity the means to renew itself through the realities of the impossible, through life beyond life, through all that vibrates unseen, gesturing toward illuminations that surpass mortal understanding. Small wonder, then, in an epoch imperiously beckoned by all these distances, if Art contemplates with heightened satisfaction that aspect of itself which pledges most surely to reach them.

And more! Music contains all things within itself, and can accomplish even the painter's art. Through sound alone it conjures landscapes within dreams. Poetry, likewise a sonorous art, can paint only through sounds, and how natural that it should seek this secret from music... Yet haven't these two forms of Art, Verse and Note, always somehow circled one another? Could even the Romantics themselves—I mean the greatest—paint except through musical symbolism? The Naturalists, to cleave more closely to painting alone, were obliged to abandon Verse altogether! Orpheus sang...

Yet even as music and poetry strive to supplement one another or to fuse, an analogous impulse compels Painting to forge, within its own confines, new means—musical and poetical—of achieving harmony and dream. Nowhere is this tendency more manifest than in those masters I have named. To them we must add M. Monet, of whom I can say, without falling into the pretentious banality of "art criticism", that he truly makes colour sing. We must include as well M. Raffaëlli, that modernist and self-styled *characterist* who reads in a face the meaning of its physiognomy and in a stance the significance of its gesture, along with Messieurs Fantin-Latour, Ribot… Not one of these painters oversteps the providential boundaries or assigns his art a goal beyond its natural reach. All preserve the most legitimate regard for a craft whose secrets they have plumbed more profoundly than any before them. Yet to the utmost of their powers, they push back these goals to approach more closely that essence at once unique yet common to all beauty. They stretch these boundaries; they bid these secrets carry them further, ever further still. And it is often with admirable simplicity—simplicity, that seal of certainty—that they renew an art seemingly imprisoned within sacred walls built by ancient masterpieces, that they stir the immutable and bestow upon the supremely precise the charm of the indefinite, upon the instantaneous something like successive layers and returns, upon the immediate a dreamlike distance.

Consider Monticelli, whose very name embodies the most egregious injustice of our age. He may well be the greatest of all painters, though his works are palmed off as counterfeit Diaz. When

Monticelli paints us a lion, what do we see? At first, in this wizardry of blazing, seemingly hurled colours, one perceives nothing but violence that assaults the eye. But look more intently and, if I may put it thus, listen. One sees these tawny fires come to terms, accord with one another, compose an ensemble, a symphony in brass, whilst binding them together, like a guiding thread of themes, runs the modelling, itself expressed purely through colour. Recall suddenly that this is indeed *a lion,* and understanding breaks upon us like dawn. Monticelli has perceived and reveals to us the profound and unmistakable *analogy* between the beast's pelt and its ferocity, and without granting the creature the hackneyed menacing gesture of naïve illustration, he has simply made the terrible tones of that savage coat roar.

M. Eugène Carrière presents us with altogether different yet equally persuasive evidence. M. Carrière, the artist most disputed by official criticism—no doubt because he brings the most precious innovations—has been struck by the error into which we are misled by the effects of immediacy, by full daylight, by the high noons of distance. He has come to believe that very little is required for painting, and he reduces everything—colour and character alike—to unity. To see more truly, he stands back from his subject; he lets intervene between his eyes and nature that exactitude of distance which, in the realm of forms, might stand for the justice that duration brings to the realm of morals and events. He catches the human face at that moment when attenuated forms are about to declare themselves, when they still retain the joy of what might yet become. By this means he banishes from every mind the pretension of fixing nature and lending it an air of tangibility. We are commanded instead to believe that these forms have remained mobile on the canvas, as they were in life, whilst taking on the spectral accent of an apparition. Carrière unveils, though he seems to veil. He translates appearance into the dream of reality it harbours. From this appearance he draws forth what naturally suggests itself, yet what genius alone can penetrate, namely the reality of age and visage. This he expresses through mysterious touches which guard against saying everything, for if they did, the soul, bereft of any further hope of desire, would be less fulfilled than cheated. Instead, these touches intimate rather than explain. The consummate artist has embedded in his very means of expression the symbol of that expression itself, in this palette of whites and greys, these vaporous substances, these solidities never robbed of lightness. And the setting, whatever it might be, dissolves as mere pretext of furniture or walls, retaining only its harmonious essence: the relationships and intervals between tones. Thus, in what you might take for a familiar theatre, the young master's sublime artistry establishes—as remote as possible from primary visibilities, beyond time and place—a scene of eternity: light itself! Within this light, and like all else governed by the laws of logical luminous progression, the human figure is born, hovers, wavers, gains definition, finally thrums with life, so vital indeed that you might step aside to let it pass, so ready does it seem to emerge from the frame where only the atmosphere it breathes, which is not your own, contains it. It would emerge, imposing upon you its vision of soul laid bare through the captured secret of the laws by which Nature renders itself in visible form.

Need I dwell upon how Monticelli is musical and metaphysically poetical, how M. Carrière is a poet through the sheer intensity of his painter's vision? I might equally have shown how M. Gustave Moreau elevates painting through the poem, revealing the contemplative truth of humanity's great moments in a form unmarked by the particularity of date. Similarly, I might have shown how M. Puvis de Chavannes transcends the entire modern cycle of painting and reconnects with the primitives through a shared feeling for an ideal rather than through imitation. Yet this fundamental distinction

must be preserved: their mysticism led them to the Art of Religion, whilst his leads to the Religion of Art.[100].

Here is the common law governing all artistic endeavour in our time: Art circles back to its wellsprings, and as it was one at the beginning, so it now re-enters the primal path of Unity, where Music, Painting and Poetry—triple reflection of the same central radiance—grow ever more alike as they approach this point from which expansion began, this goal, now, of concentration.

This impulse has made itself felt in sculpture as well. M. Rodin, that extraordinary symphonist of the passions, together with M. Antokolsky, that portraitist who captures humanity at its most psychologically revelatory moments, are leading this Art back towards music and poetry, even as ingenious essayists propose to enrich it further with the advantages of polychromy.

Even Architecture, that immemorial mother of all the Arts, that primordial art, prepares to erect the Temple worthy of housing the feast of total reunion. Here, let me be the first to speak of someone unknown. Much has been made of this century's failure to leave its mark on Architecture[101]. Could a century of scattered attempts at spiritual fraternity—whilst the analytical struggle raged on—possibly conceive architectural innovation, when the fundamental purpose of any monument is to shelter peace and union? Today, with conditions transformed and vision clarified, what yesterday would have proved impossible now becomes achievable. Thus a young man, guided by no revelation save the lightning of his own genius and his understanding of art beyond and despite academic conventions, has *created* a synthetic and modern architectural order. Albert Trachsel, too, has returned to the origins, letting himself be guided by an increasingly simplified magnification of the human form within the monument. Yet he has not lost the modern sensibility in this great journey. His work is characterized by an immobile majesty, timelessly ancient yet dating from nowhere, all the while preserving the elegance and—dare I say—the velocity of our own age. To see these monuments standing may remain merely the hope of this generation. Who will declare: the time has come? At least we shall see the vision realised[102].

Now, the Poet watches all these efforts—so perfectly aligned with his own desires—with trembling heart. He feels obscurely that an immense burden has been laid upon him. Poetry, nearer than any art to the wellspring of all arts, which is Thought itself, could only enter the supreme contest of all human forms of Beauty on condition that it reign. The theatre—where doubtless, should this civilisation not crumble too soon, the rite of aesthetic Religion will be performed—belongs first and foremost to the Poet. But how can one speak of the theatre! This art, for all the talent lavished upon it by the writers whose noble efforts I have acknowledged[103], is lost. Yet to theatre is promised the supreme Feast. But countless revolutions will surely be needed before the glimpsed miracle becomes reality, before the radiant aesthetic syllogism whose clear premises Wagner merely established can reach its conclusion. (Such matters lie too far ahead for treatment in this necessarily preliminary and general book).

At the very least, to prepare himself for the formidable honour to come, the Poet feels duty-bound to achieve within himself, within his art itself, a Synthesis that symbolises the final Synthesis ordained by the progressive evolution of the aesthetic idea, and stands amazed and grieved that his conditions of existence in the world should be worse than ever before.

I mean the present conditions of literary life, both material and moral.

We are told, not without some justification, that these have never been easier. What we call literature has become market merchandise, bought and sold like any other commodity. Publishers and directors (of journals and theatres) are remarkably accommodating. The written *line* commands good payment almost everywhere... And so, barring madness or miracle, no man of letters in our time need starve. Or so we are assured.

To argue the point would be sheer folly! — Better to leave certain things unsaid. The very idea of trafficking in poetry offends against honour itself. Yet this position strikes many as archaic and mythical, particularly in a society that congratulates itself on its liberalism whilst having embraced its own mediocrity, that prides itself on good sense whilst having taken leave of its senses… — The practice itself flies in the face of reason, now that the *rue du Sentier* has become the final arbiter of art no less than commerce, now that art itself has been reduced to trade. Those who pay the piper call the tune. Since the rue du Sentier holds the purse strings, the rue du Sentier claims the privilege of instructing poets in matters of taste. And they permit themselves to be governed thus? What choice have they, as subjects of that sovereign, the Public! But public taste—what is it, really? What drives it at bottom? Corruption, greed, folly and caprice—there's your answer. Which is why Poets, not all blessed with private fortunes, must either debase themselves as dancing bears or fairground curiosities to catch the crowd's eye, or else accept hack work made doubly vexing by the public's ever-shifting fancies, work that belongs more to some trade in elegant trifles than to Art. Thus is precious time squandered, with genius degrading itself in vulgarities it cannot touch without contamination, time stolen from the work that would require our every waking moment, from art which, as the saying goes, is long whilst life… and so forth. — The upshot being that this new comfort in literary life suits only the Mediocre.

Let us not be deceived into mistaking for a genuine artistic renaissance the critics' enthusiasm for what they term—and the very vocabulary used ought to disclose everything to us—"avant-garde literature". I won't impugn the expertise or good faith of these critics. I merely suggest they cannot say what stands in need of being said, that their acclaim manufactures hollow reputations for real talents. How much better the "obscurantism" of the old critics who, whilst building solid reputations for spurious talents, at least kept their hands off what they would have desecrated! Certain praise simply confirms and enshrines worthlessness; certain abuse is the smoke that proves the fire.

As ill fortune would have it, the critics[104] have cultivated in the *rue du Sentier* a taste for novelty. Hand in hand with "the arrival of democracy in literature", this appetite for refinement, elegance and poetic flourish has gone wretchedly to seed. Nearly every book published these last ten years—the dreary ones, I mean—fairly reeks of *affectation*. What a miserable business! What a ludicrous state of affairs! Barracks-room elegance, the bagman's notion of breeding, pageboys' livery on grooms, drawing-room talk in the servants' hall... The air has grown that much heavier for poets who sometimes fancy themselves living amongst a tribe of apes...

New Formulae

Introduction

I have dwelt at considerable length on the ancient causes behind the literary movement of our day. I have just warned that difficulties of every sort stand in its way. What's more, I believe this movement has been too hastily defined and delimited. People speak of *Decadence* and *Symbolism*, yet I recognise no genuine literary decadence save in fashionable novels. I know of no literature that isn't symbolic. Nothing could be more perfectly futile than these labels. The so-called Decadents, in writing with a language restored to its etymological sources, and through their love—excessive, we are told—of the rare word, bore witness above all to that wholly legitimate impulse never to let any of the treasures of the language lie fallow. They were mounting a reaction against the debasement and impoverishment, against the 'decadence' of the French language itself.

Yet this remains but one of the secondary hallmarks of the New Literature. To speak plainly, given the singular dispersion of the young writers who embody it, their common traits appear, at first glance, rather difficult to discern. The Romantics, the Parnassians, the Naturalists formed groups—groups that may well have been regimented, but groups nonetheless where they gathered and each knew what the others were planning. Today's poets and novelists cross paths purely by accident, toil away in profound isolation, and generally prefer to steer clear of one another altogether. Why should this be? Perhaps because *observing* life or *gesticulating* at it allows one to unite without penalty, as the Naturalists and Romantics understood. The latter, being theatrical creatures, were scarcely troubled by applauding or hissing one another, and the former, like laboratory specimens, were thrilled to gather round the same microscope beneath the same lamp. Perhaps because one can still unite, and indeed must, to repel the barbarian invasions of Art, to defend *Form* against such incursions? — Yet see how, once that work was done, the Parnassians went their separate ways to write in solitude, each crafting a personal oeuvre where everyone claimed freedoms with form itself that had once been systematically proscribed. Indeed, one can gather together for analysis, but synthesis proves divisive by its very nature. The '*all in one*' renders each self-sufficient. Solitude is essential if life is to converge wholly within a single intelligence and come into full flower beneath a single hand. This very phenomenon, this scattering of young poets, betrays to me what lies deepest in their thought, what they are endeavouring to achieve. Theirs is no middling ambition! At the core of their thought lies the desire for EVERYTHING. They are hunting for aesthetic synthesis, and nothing else will do.

If not as a *single group*, you might counter, then surely they unite in smaller groups. After all, they have their reviews.

This brings us to the most intriguing aspect of their position. These reviews, which can be tallied readily enough, possess a distinctive unity all their own. Either they are established to champion a specific idea, a doctrine precisely articulated from the outset, or they spring from a single governing will. When it comes to those literary reviews that purport to transcend both doctrine and personality, their disinterested stance belongs to another age.

— *La Jeune France*, following ten years of hard-fought existence, expired from trying to satisfy everyone.

— *La Revue Contemporaine* enjoyed a briefer life but left more lasting marks. Its contributors lacked not talent but coherence. The entire younger generation found voice in this Review through Adrien Remacle, Edouard Rod, Emile Hennequin, Joseph Caraguel, Edmond Haraucourt, Charles Henry, Gabriel Sarrazin, Charles Vignier, Mathias Morhardt, Jean Moréas, Ernest Jaubert, Laurent Tailhade, Paul Adam, Paul Margueritte, Maurice Barrès and myself. They were joined by certain masters, amongst them Messieurs de Banville, Leconte de Lisle, Verlaine, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. But its manifold directions allowed too much latitude. A number of like-minded spirits found expression there, yet they never quite merged into one. Its success proved yet again that parliamentary governance in literature is untenable. The venerable 'republic of letters' has only ever been a patchwork of minor and major principalities.

— *La Vogue* was a delightful miscellany, though early signs were already there of a personal candidature taking shape. One finds here too the enduring influence of numerous writers who arrived as youths. Perhaps the most distinct and valuable is that of Jules Laforgue.

— We must pass over *Le Scapin*, an attempt at attempting a group, altogether sincere and altogether young—too young.

— *La Revue Wagnérienne* is quintessentially of our age. It too has run its course but had set itself these bounds. What the Review set out to do and achieved is evident in its name itself. The goal was precise articulation of Wagner's aesthetic doctrines, not their vulgarisation. Through this invaluable periodical, admirably steered with an unerring sense of direction, Édouard Dujardin and Téodor de Wyzewa took pains that were far from superfluous[105].

— The original *Revue Indépendante* was Félix Fénéon's work, following his earlier and less consequential venture, the *Libre Revue*. It followed the old principle of gathering contributors bound by no prior doctrinal consensus. The second incarnation of the *Revue Indépendante*, a magazine of literature and art, proves more telling. It professed to stand apart from "vain decadent agitations," but therein lies not its true significance. At first under Dujardin and Fénéon's direction, it was virtually a one-man show by Téodor de Wyzewa. The arrival of Gustave Kahn saw him swallow up the entire operation. De Wyzewa vanished from the scene, at which point Kahn took the reins and set about furnishing, month after month for nearly a year, both exemplar and theory—often simultaneously—of a literature intensely his own.[106].

Other journals have sprouted here and there, and that's about all one can say for them.

A single one, *Le Décadent*, calls for specific mention. Its extremity was so grotesque that one cannot help but rue encountering there the occasional beloved name, Laurent Tailhade's amongst them. Yet this very excess carries its own instructive weight. What renders this little sheet so absurd is its conviction that it speaks for a School, in an age when the term has lost all currency. No doctrine whatever informed the venture. Initially, the well-intentioned invoked M. Paul Verlaine's name at every turn, but M. Paul Verlaine has long since severed all literary ties with the "decadent group," a spurious collective assembled round nothing but absent ideas. I don't doubt these young men burn with "the purest love of fine letters," which is touching yet inadequate. Were it not for their inadvertent service in proving how utterly antiquated and illusory any pretension to literary schools has become, I should have left them to their essential void.

The same proof had already been furnished by Jean Moréas and Paul Adam with their foundation of *Le Symboliste*, an organ so fleeting it produced merely four numbers. Paul Adam proclaimed there, amongst other pointless pronouncements, that the entire literature of the seventeenth century has left us nothing worth reading. Moréas laboured mightily to write in splendid gibberish. Those who recognise the worth of these two young writers of genuine talent lamented such squandered energy.

Running parallel to these diverse forays into youthful periodicals, the established reviews adopted their own posture, which would prove piquant to examine, though I shall not do so here.

Suffice it to say that youthful boldness appears to have brought into greater prominence geriatric timidity. Yet perhaps the latter bears some responsibility for the former. The solemn reviews, hermetically sealed against anyone not to the Academy born, have betrayed their proper office, which is to guide intellectual currents, not stem their tide. *What manner of composition must an article assume to earn a place in the Revue des Deux-Mondes?* (An article ought to be written on this very question, though their pages would never accommodate it.) There was a time when one *made one's name* there.

The scattering of the Young thus betokens their withdrawal from the fray, into independence. And mark this well: all these poets whom the "grand papers" have sought to cast as revolutionaries and rabble-rousers are straightforward, diligent craftsmen. Their entire clamour consists in publishing books. They lack even the childish urge of the Romantics—forgivable in its merriment—to épater le bourgeois**tn11**. For them, he might as well not exist.

Yet in the beginning, back in those antediluvian days when a modest literary leaf appeared, first as *La Nouvelle Rive Gauche* and subsequently as *Lutèce*, the Decadents made a show of forming a movement and staging a public manifestation, being quite prepared at that time to adopt this battle-standard. These atavistic impulses met their gentle comeuppance: *Les Déliquescences.*

Nothing even faintly resembling this can be found today. Not that the fog has lifted entirely, nor that works of genius have erupted. But the work continues in silence. Certain very young poets, full of good intentions but perhaps too ignorant initially, are now, one hopes, acquiring what they lacked. Meanwhile, temperaments are making themselves known, whether sound or flawed from the beginning. Certain elements foreign to the French genius follow their natural trajectory and overstep the bounds of Sense and Taste, whereas the traditional strain simultaneously recovers its essential standing.

Beyond these formal qualities, one ought to note the fundamental ones. But can one properly or fairly judge contemporaries, one's colleagues and competitors who, having scarcely crossed the threshold of maturity, have yet to articulate the personal equation of their own humanity? "Dissect only the dead," counsels Alfred de Vigny. As for the living, basic good manners make it incumbent upon us to judge solely their works.

I shall treat the Decadents or Symbolists no differently from other artists who never swore blind allegiance to any master. I shall address only those who genuinely, and for themselves alone, pursue the New Truth.

I shan't name everyone, and I declare forthrightly that my omissions carry no disdainful intent. The business of exhaustive cataloguing belongs properly to reference literature. Then too, a number of the chronologically young have minds that, however gifted, feel more antiquated than creation itself.

Furthermore, I have no intention of establishing hierarchies. Nor shall I betray preferences. All whom I mention, I salute. They all, I trust, dignify these pages. By examining their theories, we shall watch the mists that shroud tomorrow's dawn either thicken or disperse. We shall trace, in the New Formulae, the effects of causes embedded in the Accomplished ones. Brevity shall govern my approach: theories will be summarised without contention, and I shall offer sparse opinion on the value of these experiments. What I myself think will be found in the concluding pages.

The Poets

As M. Mallarmé observes, *books of verse are always perfectly splendid—how could they be anything less*? The spell of ordered number and ever-enriching Rhyme redeems all. Yet surely one ought never to produce "books of verse". Would you, without being a musician, presume to touch the harp in a drawing-room? You know full well that your fumbling fingers would nevertheless draw forth sounds that, taken individually, would each be harmonious. That's not how it works, though. *If you cannot "play a proper tune", leave the harp alone*. Books of verse can be perfectly splendid, to be sure, except when they turn out TO BE SOMETHING ELSE ALTOGETHER...

Laurent Tailhade is a mystical pagan, a sensualist who spiritualises the flesh. His lineage runs from M. de Banville and M. Armand Silvestre, from the sun itself and sacred hymns. One might initially place him among the Parnassians rather than the new generation. Yet in his hands, the Parnassian jewel-work strikes a different note entirely, beginning with dazzlement before shifting into something more unsettling. Here are mysticisms both dubious and overdressed, a madonna fit for Baudelaire's devotions, but infinitely darker for having forgotten her darkness, infinitely sadder for that particular smile. A species of sacrilegious piety. The poet's dream barely knows what to do except toy with sacred vessels, prop itself on missals, throw copes over surplices. It is by way of this mysticism that sensuality attains its most exquisite refinements. Such magnificent décor treats the Gospel as though it were merely a pretext for beauty, offering not the beauty of constraint but a sumptuous accompaniment to every indulgence. The sun glinting off all this squandered gold has dissolved the creeds, paring them down until nothing remains but their irreducible elements: love, life, and nature. The beloved, that beautiful creature destined to die, is worshipped in the celestial halo where love yearns to rise, yearns to

Usurp with laughter the divine tributes [107]

and lay them at her feet. Is this not the truth of it? Let us look at:

Dans le nimbe ajouré des vierges byzantines,
Sous l'auréole et la chasuble de drap d'or
Où s'irisent les clairs saphirs du Labrador,
Je veux emprisonner vos grâces enfantines.
Vases myrrhins! trépieds de Cumes ou d'Endor!
Maître-autel qu'ont fleuri les roses de matines!
Coupe lustrale des ivresses libertines!
Vos yeux sont un ciel calme où le désir s'endort.
Des lis! Des lis! Des lis! Ô pâleurs inhumaines!
Lin des étoles! chant des froids catéchumènes!
Inviolable hostie offerte à nos espoirs!
Mon amour devant toi se prosterne et t'admire,
Et s'exhale avec la vapeur des encensoirs,

Dans un parfum de nard, de cinname et de myrrhe![108]

[Within the filigreed haloes of Byzantine virgins,
Beneath the aureole and chasuble of cloth-of-gold
Where Labrador's clear sapphires play with light,
I long to capture your childlike graces.
Myrrhine vessels! Tripods from Cumae or Endor!
High altar where the roses of matins have bloomed!
Lustral cup of libertine ecstasies!
Your eyes—a tranquil heaven where desire sleeps.
Lilies! Lilies! Lilies! O inhuman pallors!
Linen of stoles! Chant of chill catechumens!
Inviolate host offered up to our hopes!
My love prostrates itself before you in wonder,
And rises with the incense smoke,
In perfumes of nard, of cinnamon and myrrh!]

Who could wonder that the celebrant at this particular altar should sing, *in fraternal spirit, of ancient ephebes*? Of great-hearted Narcissus who perished from self-love?

What makes Laurent Tailhade truly of our time is principally the colouring of his inspiration—this mystical and sensual lyricism which, at such fever-pitch, could only belong to this century. I admire his form, purely lyrical at heart, for preserving the integrity of living Verse in its authentic rhythm—that flash of exaltation, that *golden arrow*, to borrow Glatigny's expression. Yet this unrelenting lyric verse, sustained without respite through an entire volume, makes for an exhausting read that must perforce be fragmented differently than the work's internal logic would prefer. It does away with countless moments of rest and building tension, those transitional beats that might have permitted the exaltation to strike effectively without draining us, and through which the golden arrow would have struck true more dependably. Even those religious ceremonies Tailhade so rightly cherishes play out, like all human endeavours that reach towards the sacred, not through such unremitting tension of the whole being, but through swells that gather and build successively, through rhythmic alternations of silence, gesture and speech—certain parts spoken aloud, others given over to singing—so that the Mystical Ballet choreographs itself to the turning points of the Mystical Drama, and by orchestrating these silences with the whole creates a work of consummate effect that never grows monotonous.

Edmond Haraucourt remains faithful to a form already consecrated by certain pages of Baudelaire and Leconte de Lisle. Though his spirit offers no particularly original thoughts and professes no religion, it nonetheless arrives at a peculiar mysticism that combines melancholy with power whilst remaining stubbornly materialist. With lucid consciousness of his project and clear-sighted vision of his aims and methods, he orients himself toward the future without quite belonging to it, whilst coloured by the past most notably in places where, through sustained and perhaps excessive exercise of rational faculties, his vision reached forward to anticipate the moment in which we find ourselves. Indeed, in his novel[109] more than in his verse[110], this materialist betrays a renewed inclination toward the classical and spiritual working-out of thought. This tendency is neither insignificant nor antiquated, for such

rediscoveries of what came before are exactly how successive generations win permission to innovate daringly.

Haraucourt shows himself first and foremost as a moralist rather constrained in articulating the grounds of his moral philosophy. Yet he remains an assured and vigorous prose stylist with thorough command of the language. How intriguing it is to observe this collapse of sensualism in a man who would bristle at being called 'suggestive' and who would sooner snap the points of delicate needles than handle them. Yet here he is, charging bull-like into the chasm of mysticism, and sentimental mysticism no less, simply because he threw himself into the pursuit of the physical absolute too far. What follows from such a pursuit keeps the poet trapped in sorrowful contemplation. A less spiritual temperament would doubtless transgress these boundaries repeatedly in pursuit of sensuous joy. Such was the original impulse. Yet knowledge of our limited span, with the heartache that attends such knowledge, inserted itself into the equation, and the poet has not overcome them, keeping himself hostage to the perpetual meditation of a sensualist whom one indelible moment brought round to believing in his own soul. These are the sentiments of our time, if not of the immediate moment, and it is these that have earned Edmond Haraucourt his place in this book.

Jean Moréas is Greek. This heritage helps us understand numerous aspects of his talent, particularly the central guiding influence he took in, that of Théophile Gautier, sovereign of opulent Asia. Moréas commands nearly the full complement of romantic qualities whilst possessing none of the classical virtues. He is a painter in song. Through his remarkable gifts as a formalist and his profound sensibility as a musical colourist, he takes his place amongst the practitioners of the New Art. When he makes his occasional raids upon metaphysics, I would rather await his return amongst the splendid gestures—made rhythmic by means of splendid songs—of his intensely vivid medieval fantasies. His melancholy puzzles me, for I discern less substance in his emotions than in their magnificent vestments of syllables. I wonder at and lament these eyes, drunk with chromatic joy, feeling themselves obliged to weep.

In place of these inhospitable *Syrtes* (as his epigraph would have it), these *Cantilènes* straining after languor, and all these *Funérailles*, I have hopes that this singer will give us verses of joy, triumph, and festivity to which I shall extend my applause. With him, questions of formal artistry assume paramount importance. With regard to language, Moréas draws ever more frequently upon our thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poets. Between the *Cantilènes* and the *Iconostases*, he has bound together numerous sheaves of ancient words, giving them fresh currency. Such precious terms he scatters with generous abandon. And why should he not? He stands mercifully distant now from those *glacial nights* when journalists bandied them about amongst themselves, from gazette to gazette. What an age ago that was!

Rhythm matters more here, and the true originality of what Moréas accomplished lies in the rich variety of rhythms he introduced. This still-slender œuvre reveals transformations already sharply defined. Gautier's influence encounters Verlaine's and yields before it. The latter, having made visible to the young poet an unexplored way forward, walks away from him midway to venture further alone. The verse—unshackled by Victor Hugo, then brought to order by Gautier and the Parnassians—keeps faith with the liberties it has secured for itself, whilst Verlaine lets it loose from both ancient and modern fetters, managing all the same to hold fast to what makes it fundamentally French verse. Moréas and other poets of this generation represent, as they themselves see it, the ultimate logical extension of the

Verlainian principle. By endowing prosody with a flexibility previously unknown, this principle renders it capable of expressing subtleties earlier ages paid no heed to.[111]

In Moréas's hands, verse becomes pure musical notation from which he conjures remarkable effects. Take this stanza from the poem of *Agnès*:

« Sœur, douce amie, » lui disais-tu douce amie,
Les étoiles peuvent s'obscurcir et les amaranthes avoir été,
Que ma raison ne cessera mie
De radoter de votre beauté.

Car Cupidon ravive sa torche endormie
A vos yeux, à leur clarté
Et votre regarder, « lui disais-tu », est seul Mire
De mon cœur atramenté.

["Sister, sweet companion," thus you'd speak, sweet companion,
Though stars may darken and amaranths vanish quite,
Yet never shall my reason abandon
Its fond obsession with your beauty bright.

For Cupid at your eyes rekindles passion's
Torch, once dormant, at their light,
And your gaze alone, thus you'd tell her, fashions
The mirror for my ink-stained heart's plight.]

Surely no one would question that we are in the presence of literature here, of exquisite music given visible shape? And in this, more than elsewhere, I discern an unerring instinct for synthetic art. As literature gravitates towards music and painting, so prose aspires to verse and strives to merge with it. Moréas has grasped this principle, though undoubtedly it is prose that emerges the richer.

Here likewise, prose peels away certain rhymes from the chanson, giving rise to pure rhythm:

Vous avec vos yeux, avec tes yeux,
Dans la bastille que tu hantes
Celui qui dormait s'est éveillé
Au tocsin des heures beuglantes.

Il prendra sans doute
Son bâton de route
Dans ses mains aux paumes sanglantes.

Il ira, du tournoi au combat,
A la défaite réciproque
Qu'il fende heaumes beaux et si clairs,
Son pennon, qu'il ventèle, est loque.

Le haubert qui lace
Sa poitrine lasse,
Si léger, il fait qu'il suffoque.

Ah, que de tes jeux, que de tes pleurs
Aux rémissions tu l'exhortes,
Ah laisse: tout l'orage a passé
Sur les lys, sur les roses fortes.

Comme un feu de flamme,
Ton âme et son âme,
Toutes deux vos âmes sont mortes! [112]

[You with your eyes, with your eyes there,
In that fortress you make haunted ground—
The sleeper has awakened where
The hours bellow their alarum sound.

No doubt he'll seize
His pilgrim's staff with ease
Though blood stains both his palms around.

From tournament to battle he'll ride
To meet defeat reciprocal and stark;
Though he cleave bright helms on every side,
His pennon waves a tattered mark.

The mail-coat binding
His breast, so grinding
Light, yet suffocates him in the dark.

Ah, through your games, through all your tears,
How you exhort him to reprieve!
Ah, let it be—the tempest clears
O'er lilies, o'er roses that won't grieve.

Like blazing fire,
Your soul, his soul entire—
Both souls are dead and cannot live!]

Furthermore, even while recognising, as we have seen, that verses arrange themselves in stanzas whose liberties are held in check by the principle of symmetry, Moréas sustains his reverential attitude toward the fixed poetic forms which his beloved Middle Ages employed with such grace.

Jules Laforgue occupies a singular position not merely amongst his generation but in the whole of literature. He appears to have experienced every desire that the boldest, the most reckless perhaps, might venture to pursue, and to have transmuted them all into extravagant smiles that feign restraint, sweeping gestures arrested mid-flight, verses and prose delivered in a register that is earnest—rather than solemn—at the same time expressing thoughts at once wild, refined, and profound. Here was a wounded soul of impeccable "breeding" who, with no healing to be found for her white-hot griefs, had made up her mind to present them as jests. Yet the poet does voice his complaints, and these ring out with peculiar shrillness:

Ah! que la vie est quotidienne
[Ah! how dismally daily is life]

or again:

Je suis trop jeune, ou trop agonisant.
[I am too young, or else too near my end.]

Yet what he typically prefers, even when the subject is himself, is to sustain that exquisite irony which belongs to him *alone* in French poetry, which he does in fact command with a refinement and penetrating acuity *unparalleled* in any literature. The irony here amounts to recognising two things simultaneously: on one hand, our keen awareness of how thoroughly and irreparably insufficient are those from whom we seek happiness; on the other, the equally thorough and unconquerable sincerity that drives us to keep seeking it anyway. Such is the cry of that affliction peculiar to modernity known as Consciousness, crying out with full awareness of its own absurdity. Here and there in Laforgue's work, this perpetually vigilant consciousness outdoes both the modern and the human soul by becoming the vast, dispassionate consciousness of nature itself, that is to say universal life as it observes its own destined course. We see this at work in "Pan et la Syrinx", one of the masterworks contained in *Moralités légendaires*. Still, we should not imagine the matter is philosophically so uncomplicated. Even the consciousness of nature, itself being one highly specific manifestation of the expectant soul, turns the same mockery upon itself for embodying what that soul takes to be so deeply meaningful.

L'Autre sexe! l'Autre sexe!
Oh! toute la petite Eve
Qui s'avance, ravie de son rôle,
Avec ses yeux illuminés
D'hyménée,
Et tous ses cheveux sur les épaules,
Dans le saint soleil qui se lève!

Un corps, une âme
Amis d'enfance!
Toute ma femme
De naissance!

— O Syrinx! Voyez et comprenez la Terre et la merveille de cette matinée et la circulation dela vie.

Oh, vous là et moi, ici! Oh, vous! Oh, moi! Tout est dans Tout!

[The Other sex! The Other sex!
Oh! little Eve entire
Who comes forth, enchanted with her part,
Her eyes ablaze
With nuptial fire,
All her tresses on her shoulders spread
In the sacred dawning sun's rays!

One body, one soul—
Since childhood whole!
My wife complete
From birth's first beat!

— O Syrinx! Behold and comprehend the Earth, this morning's miracle, life's circulation!

Oh, you there and I here! Oh, you! Oh, I! All is contained in All!]

Nowhere do I find psychological insight more penetrating yet more poetic—exact in detail yet sweeping in range—than in these *Moralités Légendaires*, treasures that prove superior even to the verses of the *Complaintes* and *L'Imitation de Notre-Dame-la-Lune*. To be sure, this means coming at matters by way of their contradictions and their triviality, and one would struggle to find anything quite so heartbreaking, quite so harrowing, as this form of psychological theatrics. But to appreciate Jules Laforgue properly, we must set aside conventional standards. He was exceptional in everything, not least in the very form of his art. He too had arrived at that point where verse became pure musical notation. In his Complaintes, he too had admitted prose into the realm of rhyme, taking freedoms that all worked to reinforce that note of melancholy levity: the rhyming of singular with plural, the casual addition or dropping of mute '*e*'s, and the treatment of syllable counts with sublime indifference. Greater reserve is required of us than of most in dissecting this young man dead ahead of his time, a loss that counts among the most grievous this afflicted generation has had to bear. His work, be it the songs that ring out in solitude or the caricatural strokes that mark him as so quintessentially artistic a spirit, bears witness to a sentimental sceptic: possessed of force, to be sure, yet wanting in that wise irrationality that goes by the name of hope. It resembles the smile on that enchanting face none shall forget, the smile through which everything was understood.

Gustave Kahn, whom we should scarcely separate from his departed friend, stands amongst the most sophisticated practitioners of their art in our time. His is fundamentally a symbolic art with synthetic ambitions. The very title of his collection, *Les Palais Nomades*, serves as a declaration of his intellectual trajectory and the structural logic that will govern his compositions. The idea of "wandering voices" seems to get at the heart of what he envisions when he speaks of these "nomad palaces". Voices rise from every quarter and occasionally meet in unison, though they tend to remain distinct, alternating between sorrowful whims and whimsical inevitabilities. To render these phenomena audible,

he has singled out airs and phrases born of the musical potential embedded in syllables themselves, and I rather suspect he attends to their meaning only through their sound, wilfully shutting his eyes that he might give himself over to pure acts of listening. In orchestrating the movements of his theme and its variations, he has deferred to no authority save feeling itself. This accounts for the freedom that becomes his guiding principle, a freedom visible in verses that refuse to fall into regimented lines but move forward with a seemingly unforced rhythm, so that a line of seventeen syllables might be placed beside a line of two, following the ebb and flow of sentiment as it swells into utterance or retreats beneath the surface. Musical notation proves once more to be governed by the psychological currents of passion, as verse and prose weigh themselves against each other and begin to intermingle. Prose perhaps stands to gain, whereas verse appears decidedly the worse for it. The drive to unshackle poetic form from arbitrary formal constraints has much to recommend it, yet we would do well to remember that certain laws are grounded in nature. Or to be more exact, there is one master law that subsumes the rest: *verse is a single human breath given voice, and as such it reaches its natural conclusion where the breath itself runs out.* Whatever abides within these natural limits can rightly be termed Verse, but once those limits are exceeded, we find ourselves in the territory of Prose. The Greeks held to this principle, as did the Romans, as have the Germans. Yet what matters here is not only the results themselves but also the intentions at work and the underlying causes that inform them. Gustave Kahn has come to understand that neither prose nor verse on its own will serve the essential purposes he has in mind. He brings them together into a single form, and although we might reasonably question whether such fusion ought to be attempted, what he achieves through it is beyond any reproach. There is real discernment in his approach, and he handles the balance between strong and weak elements with admirable skill. Even so, he keeps himself too firmly planted in the thin air of pure lyricism, an atmosphere in which anything prosaic strikes an off note. He does, in fairness, indicate these prosaic intrusions by dispensing with initial capitals, yet he appears to take back this concession by doing away with punctuation marks entirely. Thus:

On mourait, au fond d'or des basiliques amples
des tourmentes d'odeurs douces s'exhalaient de tes rampes
aux faîtes des tours des attentes de langueur
les haltes florissaient en larges reposoirs
où des gaines de velours des couteaux dormaient en tes soirs
Et sur l'âme des pierres planait un regard lourd.

[They were dying in the golden depths of vast basilicas
tempests of sweet fragrances rose from your ramparts
at tower peaks expectations of languor
pauses blossomed into broad sanctuaries
where knives in velvet sheaths lay sleeping in your evenings
And upon the stones' soul there brooded a heavy gaze.]

And again, from the same *Nuit sur la Lande*:

Rien ne m'est plus que ta présence
et les courbes souveraines de ta face
et les portiques de ta voix
Rien ne m'est plus que ton attente.

La halte inutile du temps
avant le frisson qui m'attend
et le charme de mes mains sur tes seins
Rien ne m'est plus que ta présence
De tes beaux yeux la paix descend comme un grand soir
et des pans de tentes lentes descendent gemmées de pierreries
tissés de rais lointains et de lunes inconnues
des jardins enchantés fleurissent à ma poitrine
cependant que mon rêve se clôt entre tes doigts
à ta voix de péri la lente incantation fleurit
imprégné d'antérieurs parfums inconnus
mon être grisé s'apaise à ta poitrine
et mes passés s'en vont défaillir à tes doigts.

[Nothing matters more than your presence
and your face's sovereign curves
and your voice's porticoes
Nothing matters more than your expectation.
Time's futile pause
before the tremor that awaits me
and the spell of my hands upon your breasts
Nothing matters more than your presence
From your lovely eyes peace descends like a vast evening
and swathes of slow pavilions descend jewelled with gems
woven from distant rays and unknown moons
enchanted gardens bloom upon my breast
whilst my dream closes between your fingers
at your fairy voice the slow incantation blooms
steeped in anterior perfumes unknown
my intoxicated being calms upon your breast
and my former selves dissolve beneath your fingers.]

Jean Moréas is Greek by birth, Jules Laforgue has spent years under the spell of English and German verse, and Gustave Kahn's roots lie in Semitic soil. Their foreign backgrounds, I would argue, account for their indifference to the French genius, to that Latin sensibility which cannot help but recoil from such calculated transgressions against nature's laws.

Louis Dumur, of mixed Swiss and Italian heritage, composes his verse according to what appears to be a new poetics, though it might be better described as one revived from traditions both foreign to France and rooted in classical antiquity. In the foreword to *Lassitudes*, he sets out his system in clear terms: "Tonic accent, which exists in French quite as much as elsewhere, falls upon the last syllable of masculine-ending words and upon the second-to-last syllable of feminine endings:

*Ex*quis, *lé*ger, *sub*til, *té*nu, *suave*, clair.

Words exceeding two syllables bear a secondary accent on the first:

*Sym*bo*le d'idé*al *ja*mais *at*teint, *ja*mais.

Monosyllables are theoretically accented, yet within the phrase they cluster into groups where accents distribute themselves according to semantic weight and position, obeying an instinct that seeks, wherever possible, to prevent one accent from immediately preceding or following another. In verse, monosyllables invariably conform to the rhythmic design established by polysyllabic words:

La nuit, *le* jour, *à l'*heu*re où* le *crois*sant *s'ar*gen*te.*

Following this principle of rhythmic conformity and positional rules, a trisyllabic word may shed the accent from its initial syllable:

*Cepen*dant, *nous pen*sâ*mes tou*jours

Que le rêve *irré*el *des po*è*tes...*

A word exceeding three syllables may transpose its initial accent:

*L'hor*reur *si*len*ci*eu*se et* ru*de* du *vieux* chêne,

Whilst a word surpassing four syllables may assume a third:

*S'é*meu*vent* len*te*ment *et* gé*néa*lo*giques.*

Having embraced this principle of tonic cadence, I deploy it to construct feet in the English, German, and Russian manner—particularly iambic and anapaestic feet, being those most congenial to French.

*L'en*nui *dé*tient *ma* tê*te* las*se et* mo*no*to*ne*

forms an iambic hexameter.

*Dé*lace de *mon* cou *tes* bras.

Tes po*ses* mol*les*, fil*le im*pu*re*

comprise two iambic tetrameters.

*J'ai pleu*ré *de le* voir *dispa*raî*tre si* vi*te*

constitutes an anapaestic tetrameter."

Louis Dumur has held onto rhyme until now and quite often, as the examples here make plain, clothes his accentual verse in something that looks rather like syllabic metre. Rhyme will undoubtedly fall away before long, though, and even now we can see the alexandrine beginning to break apart now and then:

Marchons, les chers mirages ne durèrent que trop peu!
Un jour viendra, je pense, où las de ce cuisant rivage,
Mes pieds trébucheront au roc: c'est là l'ultime vœu!
Qui bornera mon ironique course et l'esclavage.

[March on—those cherished mirages endured too brief a span!
A day will come, I think, when sick of this scorching strand,

My feet shall falter on the rock: there lies the final vow!
That bounds my bitter course and bondage both.]

Without according to Louis Dumur's system either more or less credence than the sundry other new poetics whose innovation lies in dismembering the venerable French line, I note his endeavour and inscribe it amongst the most unmistakable portents of that genuine Renewal whose advent hovers in our midst. Louis Dumur is the author of a psychological novel, *Albert*, which strikes one as completely modern. It emerges from the vision of a disenchanted moralist for whom anything that claims the title of Happiness stays perpetually out of reach, undone by an overabundance of desire in an age and a world far too restrictive to satisfy such yearnings.

René Ghil, who remains something of a foreigner[113], maintains his allegiance to the old prosody, following M. Mallarmé's example in this regard. But René Ghil offsets this simplicity by pursuing obscurity with some determination, having taken to heart M. Mallarmé's dictum that clarity is but a secondary grace. Indeed, René Ghil was once taken for M. Mallarmé's official disciple, and among the ill-informed he is still taken for one today. Yet that poet has opened no school. Whilst all of us stand, to a certain extent, under the influence of his thinking, no one has gotten it more spectacularly wrong than René Ghil. With him alone let us be unsparing, for he has done everything in his power to compromise the very art he supposed he was advancing the cause of. While his sincerity cannot be called into question, he moved with unseemly haste, avid for a title and for the kind of publicity in the press through which talent tends to bring about its own ruin. That said, I do know some fine verses of his, in his *Légendes d'âme et de sang*, such as this:

Nu du nu grandiose et pudique des roses.

[Bare with the grand and chaste bareness of roses.]

To be blunt about it, René Ghil's wrong turns originated in an intuition that was simultaneously confused and acutely sensitive to what would truly come to pass. Once more, he was led astray by acting precipitously and by indulging in the sort of opportunism to which ambitious youth is prone.

"*Take note of the sovereignties at work: white is the province of Harps, blue that of Violins, whose sound is often mellowed by phosphorescence so as to heighten the paroxysms. When Ovations reach their fullness, brass erupts in red. Flutes resonate in yellow, modulating the astonishment of the ingénue at the shimmering play across lips. Then come the Organs, uniformly black, which serve as the subdued voice of Earth and Flesh, nothing but a synthesis of the elementary instruments when taken by themselves, sending forth their plaint.*"[114]

And so forth!

René Ghil's cardinal error was to take Arthur Rimbaud's sonnet of the *Voyelles* at face value, with touching naïvety. The journalists all did likewise—and what sport they made of it! How they lampooned the great poet:

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu...

[A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue…]

Little did these journalists suspect what roars of laughter the absent one would have unleashed had he heard them! For these worthy souls had walked straight into the trap that the poker-faced wag—who didn't always lie dormant in the genius poet—had thought to lay for them one merry day. It's not

that sounds somehow escape the operations of a chromatic law, given that all nature submits to it and that sounds and colours represent twin and symmetrical emanations of light. Yet this law is far from absolute; it remains necessarily personal. Consequently, the celebrated sonnet's sole genuine meaning lies in what it reveals about Arthur Rimbaud himself, particularly in the way this law found expression through his individual temperament. Nothing proves quite so delicious, therefore, as witnessing René Ghil's treatment of this personal testament as though it were an assertion of objective truth. He busies himself with identifying errors in it, declaring his own preference—I blue, O red, U yellow—before going so far as to replace the colours themselves with freshly tinted musical instruments of his choosing: "A, the organs; E, the harps; I, the violins; O, the brass; U, the flutes."

Two Swiss writers, Charles Vignier and Mathias Morhardt, had each offered up in their youth essays in a distinctly personal poetry—the former possessing a more spiritual and musical temper, the latter inclined towards the sentimental and pictorial. No artist I know possesses quite the aristocratic feeling for art that Vignier does.

Dans une coupe de Thulé
Où vient pâlir l'attrait de l'heure
Dort le sénile et dolent leurre
De l'ultime rêve adulé. [115]

[In a cup of Thule
Where the hour's allure fades pale
Lies the senile, mournful snare
Of the last adored ideal]

Without any major works to his name—his verses being, as their title admits, barely more than skillful pastiches—he nonetheless understands. He may have pulled back from the tremendous sacrifices the High Rite demands of all who dare come near. But on what grounds can we make such a conjecture? Unless it's because seeing such a worthy artist consumed—alas!—by the demands of journalism might allow those of us who understand (and we are so few) to hope that he might yet win back his liberty? And here are further verses from Vignier, rendered in that accent distinctly his own—mock-innocent yet bitingly gay—perhaps representing what has become, at this late stage, the poets' lyrical and romantic "farewell to the lyre."

Mon triste angelot
Aux ailes lassées
Viens je sais un lot,
Lot de panacées.
Là bas c'est trop loin,
Pauvre libellule,
Reste dans ton coin
Et prends des pillules.
Sois Edmond About
Et d'humeur coulante,
Sois un marabout
Du Jardin des plantes

[My sorry cherub
With worn-out wings
Come, I've a batch,
A batch of remedies.
That place is too far,
Poor dragonfly,
Keep to your corner
And swallow your pills.
Be an Edmond About
Of easy temper,
Be a marabou stork
From the Jardin des Plantes]

Mathias Morhardt, too, has a poet's soul—one trapped in the exhausting machinery of journalism. He has fashioned magnificent verses with a strange metallic hardness to them, dressed in grand, inflexible language—with a clear preference for adverbs and verbs—that bestow upon the page a rigid bearing all its own. He is a Platonist of the most obstinate sort, as indeed one must be. His is that splendid rhythmic utterance:

"It is nature, within me, that passes whilst I remain"[116]

Yet he is just as much a sentimentalist, but one whose sincerity, piercing insight, and depth of feeling matter more than delicacy. As for his versification, he follows, generally speaking, those earlier liberties that allowed plurals to rhyme with singulars, all while maintaining both an understanding of and devotion to the grand alexandrine, as evidenced by:

C'est les vieux empereurs germains, au geste lent
Montrant la tiare d'or sur des coussins sanglants
Cortège impérial qui revient d'Italie.

[Those old Germanic emperors, with measured gesture
Displaying the golden tiara upon blood-soaked cushions—
Imperial cortège returning from Italy.]

What he strives for is a powerful central thought radiating outward through expressions of sensuality rendered sentimental—which is to say, an ideal grounded in synthesis.

Few figures illustrate more compellingly than Ernest Aubert the arduous passage that so many poets of this age have had no choice but to undertake. Despite having fallen initially beneath the spell of writers belonging to the generation prior to our own, the very moment the new ideal revealed itself to him, he progressed toward it with something like instinctive necessity. Now, following the path of every consequential artist of our age, his determination to render the unnameable has led him to forsake definiteness and minute particularity in pursuit of the unified impression to be summoned—permitting things to fade into a soft indistinctness, gesturing toward ideas by means of the painterly and melodic qualities inherent in feelings and sensory perceptions. Yet he has kept faith with the noble ancient rhythms, simply liberated from those pointless shackles that would compromise the symbol.

This poet may want for sensuality, but he commands both intelligence and imagination in remarkable supply:

Sur la plus haute tour d'un palais renaissance,
Fleur de pierre immobile au bord du flot qui bouge,
Une vierge aux longs yeux où sourit l'innocence,
Une vierge apparaît, blanche sur le fond rouge.

[Upon the loftiest tower of a Renaissance palace,
Stone flower motionless beside the shifting tide,
A virgin with elongated eyes where innocence finds solace,
A virgin appears, white against the crimson wide.]

Et sur la balustrade étendant sa main lente,
Elle contemple longuement, la vierge blanche,
La gloire du soleil dans la mer rutilante,
Et rêve, et son front haut sous son rêve se penche.

[And resting her languid hand upon the balustrade,
She gazes long, this virgin white and pure,
Upon the sun's glory in the glittering sea displayed,
And dreams, her noble brow bending to reverie's allure.]

Reine captive ou fée au pouvoir des génies,
Regarde-t-elle au ciel changeant les silhouettes
Des Rois libérateurs dont les armes bénies
Pressent à l'horizon leurs batailles muettes?

[Captive queen or fairy bound by genii's might,
Does she watch the shifting heavens for the forms
Of liberating Kings whose blessed arms invite
Their silent battles pressing at horizon's storms?]

Dans l'éblouissement des chimériques flammes
Où l'avenir ouvert à ses yeux étincelle,
Voit-elle, déroulé pour les épithalames,
Le cortège du bel Élu qui vient vers elle?

[In the dazzlement of chimeric flames
Where the open future sparkles to her sight,
Does she see, unfurled for wedding hymns' acclaim,
The cortège of the fair Elect approaching in his might?]

Ou, Rosa Mysticissima, l'Immaculée
Cherche-t-elle parmi l'embrasement des nues

La face de son Dieu doucement dévoilée
À l'extase de ses prières ingénues?

[Or, Rosa Mysticissima, the Immaculate Maid,
Does she seek amidst the blazing clouds above
Her God's face gently unveiled and displayed
To the ecstasy of her artless prayers of love?] [117]

Louis Le Cardonnel, as we find ourselves obliged to admit, belongs no longer to Poetry. The poet has taken sacred vows. Did young Literature need to prove the sincerity behind its mysticism in such a manner? Only time will show if the Church proves capable of celebrating its life force or simply records its own death—by either letting the supremely pure poet (who has not yet been dissolved into the supremely pious Levite) give voice to his faith in imperishable art, or by silencing both the art and the one who creates it. Therefore, if only as a memorial to the poet he might have become, I record here these verses by Louis Le Cardonnel:

LE RÊVE DE LA REINE

La Reine aux cheveux d'ambre, à la bouche sanglante,
Tient de sa dextre longue ouvert le vitrail d'or,
Pensant que l'heure coule ainsi qu'une eau trop lente.
En ses yeux le reflet d'une tristesse dort,
Et sur sa robe, où sont des fleurs bizarres d'or,
Elle laisse dormir son autre main si froide
Que dans un sombre jour de chapelle qui dort
De moins rigides mains portent la palme roide!
Soudain, quelle moiteur à sa peau fine et froide!
A son front lisse perle une sourde langueur,
Et son corsage en dur brocart semble moins roide:
Est-ce toi, si longtemps immobile, son cœur,
Qui pourras la savoir chasser, cette langueur,
Et faire étinceler enfin la somnolence
De ses yeux, si longtemps glacés comme son cœur,
Qui la feras tomber, l'armure du silence?
O crépuscule, dans ta grande somnolence
Un bois à l'horizon s'étage noir et bleu;
Haut, le croissant émerge et s'argente en silence:
L'Hippogriffe attendait dans le couchant de feu
Et la reine, égarant son regard noir et bleu
Maudit l'heure qui coule ainsi qu'une eau trop lente,
Et sous le dur brocart sentant sa gorge en feu
Mord son exsangue main de sa bouche sanglante!

[THE QUEEN'S DREAM]

The Queen with amber hair, with bloodied mouth,
Holds open with her slender hand the golden pane,
Thinking how time flows like water far too slow.
Within her eyes the shadow of a sorrow sleeps,
And on her gown, where strange gold flowers bloom,
She lets her other hand lie sleeping, cold—
So cold that in the sombre light of drowsing chapel halls
Less rigid hands would bear the stiffened palm!
Then suddenly, what dampness on her fine, chill skin!
Upon her smooth brow beads a muted languor,
And her bodice of hard brocade seems somehow softer:
Is it you, so long unmoving, her heart,
That might dispel at last this languor,
And kindle finally the somnolence
Within her eyes, so long as frozen as her heart,
That might let fall the armour of her silence?
O twilight, in your vast somnolence
A wood spreads black and blue upon the horizon;
Above, the crescent moon emerges, silvering in silence—
The Hippogriff awaited in the sunset's fire
And the queen, her black-blue gaze gone wild,
Curses the hour that flows like water far too slow,
And beneath hard brocade, feeling her breast aflame,
Bites her bloodless hand with her bloodied mouth!]

As a poet, Édouard Dubus seemed an unlikely champion of naturalism and anecdotal precision. That contradiction resolved itself quickly enough when his poetic instincts carried him straight into idealism. His song carries the melancholy of a pleasure-seeker who catches himself mid-dream, regretting with touching sincerity that life fails to match his vision. But the dream itself is life, and your dream becomes joy if you but know how to will it! From this current juncture, neither here nor there, this flowering born of grief:

Le ciel est envahi d'une tristesse grise
Où frissonne un reflet mourant de soleil froid;
La brise au fond du parc gémit, peur s'accroît,
Le marbre triomphal, blanc de givre, se brise.
Le rêve est désolé de brume toujours grise,
Le souvenir y laisse à peine un rayon froid.
Dans les âmes d'hiver dont la neige s'accroît
L'orgueil d'un cher empire évanoui se brise.
Pleuré longtemps par les rameaux crispés de froid,
Dans les bosquets voilés d'une dentelle grise
Un funèbre tapis de pourpre et d'or s'accroît.

Au glas du vent, la fleur d'illusion se brise.
Et, comme elle se meurt, dans l'atmosphère grise
Des yeux mystérieux luisent d'un soleil froid.

[The sky is invaded by a grey sadness
Where trembles a dying reflection of cold sun;
The breeze at the park's depths moans, fear grows,
The triumphal marble, white with frost, breaks.
The dream is desolate with mist forever grey,
Memory leaves there scarcely a cold ray.
In winter souls whose snow increases
The pride of a dear vanished empire breaks.
Long wept by branches crisped with cold,
In the groves veiled with a grey lace
A funereal carpet of purple and gold grows.
At the wind's death-knell, the flower of illusion breaks.
And, as it dies, in the grey atmosphere
Mysterious eyes shine with a cold sun.] [118]

Jean Court:

… Par la nuit violette et d'étoiles lamée,
Vers le sphinx immortel tu lèveras les bras,
Implorant le secret de sa bouche fermée.
L'impitoyable sphinx ne te répondra pas
Et tu continueras ta route aventureuse
Sans retrouver jamais le chemin de Damas.
Tu t'assiéras alors sous le porche du Temple
Où viennent les Elus prier chaque matin.
Mais nulle voix d'en haut n'ordonnera Contemple!
Car tu ne saurais plus, ployant les deux genoux,
Des fidèles courbés suivre le bon exemple.
Au fond de l'abside où l'ombre creuse les trous,
A travers un éclat fabuleux de miracle,
Fulgureront pourtant dans un courroux d'or roux
Les portes saintes de l'éternel tabernacle,
Mais leurs rayons fougueux flagelleront en vain
Ton zèle moribond qui malgré toi renâcle.
Et tandis qu'aux Croyants qui s'enivrent du vin,
Du Vin fameux qui ruisselle au fond du calice,
Se révèleront les splendeurs de l'ART DIVIN,
Tu mourras lentement et d'un très long supplice,
Dans le regret de n'avoir pu franchir le seuil
Pour t'être libéré trop tôt du dur calice.
Laisse pleurer ton âme et vêts ton cœur de deuil.

[… Through the violet night spangled with stars,
Towards the immortal sphinx you will raise your arms,
Imploring the secret of its closed mouth.
The pitiless sphinx will not answer you
And you will continue your adventurous road
Without ever finding again the road to Damascus.
You will sit then beneath the Temple's porch
Where the Elect come to pray each morning.
But no voice from above will command: Behold!
For you would no longer know, bending both knees,
How to follow the good example of the bowed faithful.
In the depths of the apse where shadow hollows out voids,
Through a fabulous burst of miracle,
Will blaze forth nevertheless in a wrath of reddish gold
The holy doors of the eternal tabernacle,
But their fierce rays will scourge in vain
Your moribund zeal which despite yourself recoils.
And while to the Believers who intoxicate themselves with wine,
With that famous Wine which streams in the chalice's depths,
The splendours of DIVINE ART will be revealed,
You will die slowly and of a very long torment,
In regret at not having been able to cross the threshold
For having freed yourself too soon from the harsh ordeal.
Let your soul weep and clothe your heart in mourning.] [119]

These verses certainly haven't reached artistic mastery. Still, there's no mistaking that their author, young as he is, possesses genuine poetic gifts. I'm delighted by his use of that old allegory comparing Art to a temple. What saves this from being merely conventional is the poet's own intuition of Beauty as something grand and real, something both religious and modern, something that exists for its own sake, sufficient unto itself. With his sense of mystery, his mystical hunger for the absolute, a poet who brings such qualities to his work can hardly be said to want for much.

Much the same could be said of Fernand Mazade. One need only consider his *Hamlet*:

La branche de verveine et votre pureté,
De la délicatesse avec de l'ancolie,
N'avez-vous pas offert à sa mélancolie
Ce qu'avaient de plus doux la lande et votre cœur?
Oh! l'homme taciturne et pourtant si flatté!
Vous plaçâtes en vain sur sa tête pâlie
La plume longue et blanche, ô dernière Ophélie!
Et plus de grâce encor qu'il n'avait de langueur.
Mais sa plaie étant telle et mortelle sans doute,
Et mortelle parce qu'il l'aimait et que toute

Sa veille et tout son rêve étaient à l'élargir,
Ce devait être peu d'une bouche ravie,
Trop peu, vraiment! de vos caresses pour tarir
La fontaine de sang qui coulait sur sa vie.

[The branch of verbena and your purity,
Delicacy together with columbine,
Did you not offer to his melancholy
What was sweetest in the moorland and your heart?
Oh! the taciturn man and yet so flattered!
You placed in vain upon his pallid head
The long white feather, O last Ophelia!
And more grace still than he had languor.
But his wound being such and mortal without doubt,
And mortal because he loved it and because all
His vigil and all his dream were to widen it,
It must have been too little from a ravished mouth,
Too little, truly! of your caresses to stanch
The fountain of blood that flowed over his life.

Through lyrical expression and youthful vitality that occasionally pretends to be spent, Henri de Régnier embodies our contemporary artistic ambitions. Embodiment and achievement, however, aren't always identical. With a kind of sovereign disdain for everything but Song itself, without planning any grand edifice, he plucks his finest thoughts and feelings like melodious blooms, those most deserving of verse's immortal crown. His poetry, both remarkably young and remarkably accomplished, displays —as I observed of Laurent Tailhade's work—a lyrical momentum that imperils the book's coherence, each line standing alone rather than dwelling amongst its fellow strophes and odes. But this poet's mysticism has moved beyond the gospels to drink directly from the wellsprings of human passion and dream, scattered at his pleasure throughout the natural world. His verse, which here too remains quintessentially Verse, stands nonetheless amongst the most distinctive ever penned. Nobly flexible, summoning through its very music all that is distant and enchanting, with its marked predilection for certain words—H. de Régnier could hardly compose thirty lines without at least once deploying that word "or", itself as dazzling as the gold it names—with languors broken by force, force gentled by flow, this verse embodies youth whilst honouring tradition:

La Terre douloureuse a bu le sang des rêves!
Le vol évanoui des ailes a passé
Et le flux de la Mer a ce soir effacé
Le mystère des pas sur le sable des grèves:
Au Delta débordant son onde de massacre
Pierre à pierre ont croulé le temple et la cité
Et sous le flot rayonne un éclair irrité
D'or barbare frisant au front d'un simulacre;
Vers la Forêt néfaste vibre un cri de mort,
Dans l'ombre où son passage a hurlé gronde encor

La disparition d'une horde farouche,
Et le masque du Sphinx muet où nul n'explique
L'énigme qui crispait la ligne de sa bouche,
Rit dans la pourpre en sang de ce coucher tragique!

[The sorrowful Earth has drunk the blood of dreams!
The vanished flight of wings has passed
And the Sea's tide has this evening erased
The mystery of footsteps on the sand of shores:
At the Delta overflowing its wave of massacre
Stone by stone have crumbled the temple and the city
And beneath the flood shines an irritated gleam
Of barbarous gold curling on the brow of an idol;
Towards the baneful Forest vibrates a cry of death,
In the shadow where its passage howled still rumbles
The disappearance of a savage horde,
And the mask of the mute Sphinx where none explains
The enigma that twisted the line of its mouth,
Laughs in the blood-purple of this tragic sunset!] [120]

And these opening lines from a *Prelude*:

Parfums d'algues, calme des soirs, chansons des rames,
Prestige évanoui dont s'éveille l'encor!
Et l'arôme des mers roses où nous voguâmes
A la bonne Fortune et vers l'Etoile d'or;
Echo d'une autre vie où vécurent nos âmes.
La mémoire d'alors et de tous les jadis
Où notre rêve aventura ses destinées
Aux hasards des matins, des soirs et des midis;
Et le mal de savoir que des aubes sont nées
Plus belles sous des cieux à jamais interdits.
Le songe d'un passé de choses fabuleuses
Propage son regret en notre âme qui dort.
Souvenir exhalé des ardeurs langoureuses
Qu'une Floride en fleurs épand sous les soirs d'or
Où les clartés des Étoiles sont merveilleuses.

[Perfumes of seaweed, calm of evenings, songs of oars,
Vanished prestige whose echo still awakens!
And the aroma of rose seas where we sailed
To good Fortune and towards the golden Star;
Echo of another life where our souls lived.
The memory of then and of all the yesterdays
Where our dream ventured its destinies

To the chances of mornings, evenings and noons;
And the pain of knowing that dawns were born
More beautiful beneath skies forever forbidden.
The dream of a past of fabulous things
Spreads its regret in our soul that sleeps.
Memory exhaled from languorous ardours
That a flowering Florida pours forth beneath golden evenings
Where the lights of Stars are marvellous.]

Alber Jhouney, whose spirit by its very nature seeks only absolute realities, is supremely the Poet for whom Beauty springs from Truth alone. A mystic, yes—and more: a devotee of those Most High Sciences which fashionable ignorance delights in scorning without understanding. Where so many search in vain for certainty and peace, Jhouney found both in these ancient teachings. He sought[121] Wisdom and Light at the wellspring of all modern thought, in shadows shot through with the only true illumination, in the doctrines of the most ancient Sages, in that surest reflection of the Absolute ever to quicken man's dim consciousness, the immemorial philosophy of the Initiates. From this crucible of truth, this most obscure poet—yet one of those of whom Villiers de l'Isle-Adam speaks, who bear their glory within their own breast—has drawn forth beauties both radiant and unprecedented. Occultists and Magi—let the mockers have their sport! Mockery is but Doubt's defence against Faith, the reflex of a scepticism that cannot bear to die. Yet beneath every sneer sounds a note of lament; the sob betrays itself through the grimace. And humanity truly does weep—that vast, craven portion of humanity that has forfeited its claim to the Absolute and now cannot bear to hear it mentioned. Little wonder they turn deaf ears to the true poets, for poets speak nothing but the Absolute, strive towards nothing but the Absolute: Absolute in Thought, Absolute in Fiction, Absolute in Expression. This radiant Trinity—none shall possess it perfectly, I know. Yet it remains Man's birthright, were he but what he ought to be. Let some few at least bear witness that they cannot be reconciled to their dispossession. This noble lament of the poets, these sentinels keeping watch through the world's long night, stands as an indictment of our somnolent age. The world knows this well enough. It answers with contempt calculated to hurt us, yet heavy matter lacks the power to rise by itself. In reality, people are nowhere near as comfortable as they make themselves out to be. A dim awareness flickers in them. The Solitary Spirit's work, the Poet's soul and craft, endangers the social arrangement they have chosen for themselves. Never mind that this work is the only thing conferring human dignity whilst the crowd wallows in brutish stupidity. Should genius ever attain its perfect realisation, its advent into the Absolute, this union of Man with God would so intoxicate humanity with revulsion for life outside the divine that all appearances would collapse into the Real. Alber Jhouney has given this marvellous expression in a poem I would gladly quote entire—a work that reads like a luminous gloss on certain passages in *Séraphita*. The human soul, the *Queen*, burning for the Absolute, suffers tempters to whisper enticements toward every relative pleasure: Archangels, Knights, Kings, Scholars, Poets, Demons—all have pleaded their suits in vain. The Queen remains unmoved. Even the Mage,

Pale and beautiful as Apollonius of Tyana,

master of heaven's and hell's secrets yet confounding them in an egoistic pride where Hell holds sway —even he murmurs his temptation:

Si tu veux être Lucifer et sa victime,
La tentatrice et la séduite, laisse-moi
Éveiller en ton sein que mon souffle envenime
Un désir, non pas riche et dévorant, mais froid
Comme la volonté d'une raison perverse
Qui, pour toi, me rendra moins dangereux que toi.
Voici le chant secret, l'eau morte que je verse
En l'urne taciturne et dure, dans ton cœur,
Eau corrosive qui le mord et qui le perce;
Eau qui change en bronze informe l'airain vainqueur
Et l'urne orgueilleuse en vase des Danaïdes
Toujours vide et rongé de soif et de rancœur.
Les parfums ténébreux et les parfums splendides
Émanés de nos corps nous environneront
D'Archanges monstrueux et de Démons candides.
.....
La Reine répond: Seul le silence me touche
D'Elohim dont le cœur reste mystérieux...…

[If you wish to be Lucifer and his victim,
The temptress and the seduced, let me
Awaken in your breast which my breath envenoms
A desire, not rich and devouring, but cold
Like the will of a perverse reason
Which, for you, will make me less dangerous than you.
Here is the secret song, the dead water that I pour
Into the taciturn and hard urn, into your heart,
Corrosive water that bites it and pierces it;
Water that changes triumphant brass into shapeless bronze
And the proud urn into the vessel of the Danaïdes
Always empty and gnawed by thirst and rancour.
The tenebrous perfumes and the splendid perfumes
Emanated from our bodies will surround us
With monstrous Archangels and candid Demons.
.....
The Queen responds: Only the silence touches me
Of Elohim whose heart remains mysterious.....]

But Elohim withholds his revelation; the Queen must die.

Grands découragements qui tombez des étoiles
Comme d'énormes voix d'ombre et de désaveu,
Voix froides qui chantez l'isolement de Dieu,
Vous triomphez: je ferme humblement mes paupières.

[Great discouragements falling from the stars
Like vast voices of shadow and denial,
Cold voices singing God's aloneness—
You triumph: I close my eyes in humility.]

And she expires,

Alone in her genius and her death.

Yet her death annihilates the very life of the indifferent; her passing plunges the world into God:

Et des voix ont chanté que cette âme profonde,
La première depuis que les êtres sont nés,
Retourne à Dieu sans rien avoir voulu du monde.
Voici par son exemple et sa mort entraînés,
Pris de son âpre ivresse, accablés de leur vide,
Sûrs du néant de leurs délires obstinés,
Les êtres ont compris que le monde stupide
Recommence toujours le même avortement
Et que vivre hors Dieu n'est qu'un long suicide.
Ils sentent que l'esprit de la nature ment
Et les trompe par les désirs qui les épreignent
Et tous ont faim et soif de l'engloutissement.
.....
Et la création sombre dans l'Absolu.

[And voices have sung that this profound soul,
The first since beings were born,
Returns to God without having wanted anything from the world.
Behold, drawn by its example and its death,
Seized by its harsh intoxication, overwhelmed by their void,
Sure of the nothingness of their obstinate deliriums,
Beings have understood that the stupid world
Always begins again the same abortion
And that to live outside God is only a long suicide.
They feel that the spirit of nature lies
And deceives them through the desires that grip them
And all hunger and thirst for engulfment.
.....
And creation sinks into the Absolute.]

The Novelists

Édouard Rod, who once moved in Naturalist circles and swore allegiance to Zola, gradually forged a path between Naturalism and the psychological novel—a path whose brilliant originality lay in redirecting the famous modern "enquiry" from its subsidiary concern with appearances and the external world towards an exploration of consciousness itself. From the objective formula of the first school, he retained its fundamental attention to physical causes; from the psychological novel, he naturally borrowed its psychology, though stripped of any pedantic overtones. Yet he also inherited its melancholy. For years Édouard Rod passed for a pessimist; people took the title La Course à la Mort at face value, and the book's tone seemed to confirm their reading. Of course, I trust this clear-eyed consciousness will never turn cheerful, given that it gazes unflinchingly at the soul and life of our age. And yet his new novel bears the title: Le Sens de la Vie. The hero of La Course à la Mort resumes his story. He has married and feels rather unsettled at having relinquished his independence, at having forged chains that now condemn him to go on living, come what may. Still, he lets himself be seduced by the sweetness of companionship and the charm of being loved. Only now and then do incidents or chance encounters stir up old tempests. But a child's birth shatters this calm: this all-absorbing creature who dominates the household, towards whom he feels even more beholden than to his wife, upends the life he had fashioned and plays havoc with his egoism. Yet he adapts, making room in his heart bit by bit; what begins as pity transforms into genuine attachment, complete with all a father's illusions. Once pity takes root in this soul, it spreads everywhere. This egoist, who never gave others a second thought, now contemplates the lot of mankind; his horizons expand, the love of humanity opens fresh wellsprings of purpose, imposing a new and noble calling. But he cannot answer it: something holds him back—that something being himself, his weakness, his scepticism, his distrust. Good and evil strike a bargain: for this modern man, love of humanity becomes a rational exercise, devoid of enthusiasm or heart. He discovers, besides, that charity draws its strength only from religious convictions capable of resolving every problem, answering every question he has posed, whilst also offering him lasting release from all the intellectual and moral torments he has endured since consciousness dawned — "But," Obermann would counter, "when has faith ever bowed to the will?" The protagonist of Le Sens de la Vie knows full well that one cannot kindle the flames of the soul as one lights the lamps of the physical world, and so he wavers, he halts, with but a single step remaining, yet powerless to take it. Perhaps he will manage it. His mistake lies in seeking, hoping for, awaiting a faith that cannot be modern man's faith; his mistake lies in wanting to escape the reason that tortures him—why not satisfy it instead? Rather than pining for sanctuary in a creed the young man had already rejected, why doesn't the mature man, since he aches with the need for truth, actually pursue it instead of sighing after it in idle, sterile longing? But such criticism would overstep literature's bounds. Let us recognise, in Édouard Rod's new work, the flowering of mystical sentiment: thus he takes his rightful place amongst the poets devoted to life's essential questions. And let us note that through La Course à la Mort, through Le Sens de la Vie, and I suspect through a third novel of the soul besides, Édouard Rod will have achieved, within a middle register yet profoundly explored, a true synthesis of a certain strand of modern humanity—a synthesis, however, that will always want for Beauty.

Joseph Caraguel yearns for synthesis, yet envisions it contained within a single volume, purged of mysticism. Though this writer possesses an uncommonly rich inner life—nourished by the most refined aesthetic doctrines and, I suspect, by communion with certain distinguished masters—he has come to focus more on human effects than their causes, on the collective rather than the individual. The intimate dramas of conscience interest him less than the movements of crowds, the temperament of communities, the student milieu (*Le Boul' Mich'*), a southern village (*Les Barthozouls*). Steeped in social questions, alert to the political dynamics of human groups, he will surely bring to light that secret life seething beneath the surface—beneath the grand gestures and outcries of assembled humanity. For while Naturalism has left its mark on him—primarily through Goncourt's influence—and while he grasps precisely how the physical shapes human nature, Caraguel hardly dismisses the claims of the spirit. Indeed, almost against his will, the very sentiment he would suppress erupts unexpectedly throughout his pages. He stands, furthermore, among those stylists who truly command the language—the authentic language, in its etymological depths. If anything, I might fault him for keeping it too rigid, for seeming to chase after *le mot juste* when dealing with simple souls and everyday matters. His splendid prose, where artistry transcends mundane subject matter, displays learning without pomposity, achieving expression with precision, poise and simplicity. Yet because he deploys exactly the right words, he bewilders the uninformed, who rush to denounce his "affectation" and "eccentricity"—poor fools who fail to grasp these elementary truths: that a distinctive mind's singularity is simply its authentic *life*, and that stylistic refinement, when guided by artistic conscience, is nothing more than literary good manners.

Consider the notorious opening of *Les Barthozouls*, which scandalised so many readers, with its supposedly outlandish word "coruscation"—found in any decent dictionary:

Beneath the coruscation of the August sun, the high road—along which only the soft complaint of slow wheels sighed—scored a raw line through the plain's exhausted verdure, like an infinite strap of incandescent iron. Yet nearing Ferralzan-l'Arvieu, as if there one were completing its riveting to the earth, it rang out as beneath hammer-blows and dissolved into ascending veils of dense dust. For here the gait of the carts bearing vintners from the lowlands to the fair would suddenly transform. Proud to arrive at a gallant pace, at coach-like velocities, their beasts still dry-coated, the drivers—young men for the most part—would wait until the fairground hove into view before lifting their reins and applying perpetual prods, to which the heavy plough-horses, whom trotting discommoded, answered with impetuous galloping; and—setting the seats of women perched amongst dust-covers bouncing, shaking wheels, whip, tackle, every loose timber in the vehicles, jangling bells and harness-irons, drumming the roadway with the rhythmic thunder of hooves —they unleashed themselves blindly into the void, in the furious madness of a cavalry charge.

To be fair, the author himself regards these stylistic and observational works as preparatory exercises, études towards the comprehensive portrait of modern society he intends to capture in one definitive volume.

J.-H. Rosny shares this preoccupation with sociology and socialism; moreover, he brings scientific expertise to bear, wedding the scientist and the socialist through a mysticism entirely free of metaphysical pretensions. "Modern mysticism is either socialist or scientific," he declares in an epigraph to *psalms* celebrating the universal "ontological symphony"—and Rosny's mysticism is both. Let me identify straightaway what damages his books: an arbitrary scheme seemingly hostile to art itself. The prose turns pedantic. Greek and Latin terms everywhere! Physiological and chemical analogies that summon no images whatsoever! Remarkably, the style often remains fresh and nimble—wherever the author abandons his laboratory jargon—which makes one regret all the more this pointless parade of

learning. His characters lead truncated lives: creatures of sensation apparently lacking minds, while the author, too much the scientist, seems to run experiments on "subjects" manufactured to the latest specifications. Then there are those ponderous, sprawling compositions without focus—what a glut of grim tales and dire encounters! What relentless, almost violent appetite for catastrophe!

That said, J.-H. Rosny commands formidable evocative powers. His scientific excesses stem from genuine strength: an acute sensitivity to a major current in human thought, to what must be modern art's fundamental condition: the marriage of religious and scientific sensibility. Hence this scientist's mysticism. Without socialism, I believe, this twin impulse—scientific and mystical—would lead our poet to transcend the immediately verifiable present in his fiction. One fears his persistent social concerns may trap him in a rather outmoded novelistic formula. Nevertheless, his originality remains undeniable: he is already our most compelling interpreter of how natural phenomena shape the human organism.

"Francis Poictevin is a landscape artist in Corot's tradition, a painter of sea and plant life beyond compare, a masterful etcher who understands the still, dead calms of light. The human soul and flesh seem to slip through his fingers.[123]" His thought therefore shrinks from human beings with trembling astonishment, almost yearning to disappear rather than disturb this consummate analyst of his own feelings as they are transmuted into nature's forms: trees, stones, water. Yet his analysis, through uncanny powers of precision and insight, manages to surpass itself, conjuring in mere lines the complete life, the secret life that dreams in beech trees, in droplets of water, and in realms beyond the infinitesimal. At times his analysis, buoyed by the extraordinary vision of a poet-painter, ventures to grapple with human figures through the genius of a Primitive or Gustave Moreau; more often it mines the past for memories—youth, adolescence, childhood—and recovers the face of former days in that exquisite uncertainty of first light, when things stand clear yet retain the fresh potential *to become something else.*

I would follow this artist even more willingly—one for whom "delicacy" is far too crude a label—through his gossamer notations of the ineffable, such as:

Blue goes forth, beyond the passions of love and death, or rather dwells in lost extremity. From turquoise to indigo, one moves from chaste convergences to final ravages. Births and griefs, so true they are struck dumb.[124]

Or this:

Between my soul and the longed-for beyond I sense some ineffably delicate tapestry that yet divides. Behind it I divine worlds of eternal newness, for at moments it stirs, troubling and delicious, beneath wafts from distant places; and the wavering figures of this tapestry wrought by no human hand, rather like ancient memories, harmonise with the slow arabesque rhythms of the fabric where something smoulders and whence escapes an echo of the ineffable.

It is chiefly in such consummate yet compact prose poems that the analyst gives way to a fuller poet, better armed; and as the mystic emerges, so too the metaphysician can be glimpsed. Yet Francis Poictevin's books, for all their delicious suggestiveness and novel beauties, still convey only imperfectly the poet's true aesthetic intent. The art he envisions—at once subtle and universal—delivers little more than subtleties. Does this artist, who knows precisely what work cries out to be done, lack nerve? One shouldn't think so, though one might worry he has too many scruples.

Moreover, this universality, this absent fiction round which a thousand reflected facets of the Idea would so beautifully hover and unfurl within a principal and expanding unity—perhaps this fiction does exist, albeit as fiction. Doesn't it take shape in the reader's memory of *Paysages* and *Songes*? Might it not be that unspoken human face, the soul's reality that betrays itself only at its edges? In retrospect, Francis Poictevin's books appear like a precious ancient chasuble, so time-worn that the main coarse weave, threadbare and unravelling beneath broken metallic ornaments surviving only here and there, persists as nothing more than the finest filaments one daren't touch for fear they might snap.

Perhaps Poictevin's affliction is that he lacks command of Verse—and how magnificently Verse would bind these unmoored prose pieces! How it would prevent the necessary incompleteness the writer quite rightly insists upon from degenerating into mere scattered addenda! His own doctrine on composition: "Revealed on the last page, yet revealed as an extension, *everything* must be suggested rather than stated, held in ineffable reserve. And thus this reserve, this tacit understanding, this final veiled confession which the rare reader must divine in his own soul—there lies the work's seal."

In probing the depths of the human condition, Adrien Remacle has struck upon one of those mysteries where the natural becomes supernatural—seemingly the only territory now open to the novelist who seeks the Absolute. To embody this extraordinary dimension of ordinary existence, the writer, having no recourse to verse, has necessarily woven his prose with varied cadences, creating the illusion of rhythm through an interplay of prose poetry and psychological analysis. The story[125]. From his mother's husband the child inherits a violent, impulsive sensuality that cripples the spirituality bequeathed by her lover. This child, who becomes a painter, never outgrows his childhood: his yearnings for absolute Beauty and absolute Love undermine one another, leaving both forever incomplete. He burns with excessive ardour; in happiness, he thirsts insatiably for the feminine; in sorrow, he retreats into the austere abstractions of divine love, then drives his art to impossible heights, only to plunge into the coarsest suspicions and vulgar abasements. In one beloved woman he seeks to unite both mysteries—feminine and beautiful, warmth and light. Yet this woman remains but an absent soul, a mere reflection, and the artist drains himself trying to conjure her into reality—he who is himself so phantasmal, forever torn between the poles of spiritual and sensual existence. The work, as it must, offers no resolution, abandoning this soul to an interior purgatory bereft of hope: doubting himself, doubting the beloved. The artist stands naked before the great winds of natural forces, unable to divine whether this breath rises from the void or from some luminous wellspring of life; alone amongst forms he takes by turns for empty illusions or distant intimations of the infinite. This prose poem:

The Poet walks the road alone, apart from crowds, ages ahead, ages behind the marching throngs. Child, man, and elder—yet ever young and beautiful. He journeys on, believing he glimpses hourly, through morning mists, beyond the noonday suns, above the evening clouds, emerging from opaque nights blue beneath serene moons, the glittering domes of the Dream City.

And he sings this City, and walks on.

He sees far mountains, blue and rose, skies of purple gold torn by vast blazing rifts, haloed with phantom cities glittering in dark recesses: behind these peaks, beneath these heavens, stands the City's mighty portal.

And he sings this City, and walks on.

Rivers and seas unveil before him green depths, blue chasms, strange reflections of past splendours, prophetic mirages of monuments to come: these are but heralds and harbingers of the City's magnificence.

And he sings this City, and walks the water's edge.

War howls across the plains, around the mountains. He pauses to contemplate, listening, the shriek of swords, the thunder of iron. He trembles: these men must battle for the City.

And he sings this City, and walks amongst men.

When warrior hosts fall silent, he passes through peaceful gardens. Young women admire him, follow—he wears a golden nimbus, his words breathe unknown perfumes, the breeze makes music in his hair. He pauses: here are fugitives from the City.

He asks them his way, sings to them, and walks on.

When the Poet has long journeyed, road-weary, he meets a woman robed in white—he knows her. She approaches: she will guide me to the City. And he sings the City and sleeps within the Dream.

Édouard Dujardin began[126] by examining certain highly peculiar cases of existence at its limits. His style, though marred by simplifications that regrettably corrupted traditional language, nevertheless achieved something like a special sheath perfectly suited to these extraordinary subjects. Subsequently, driven by the twin ambitions of realising authentic realism and fulfilling the Wagnerian imperative to render feelings in their entirety as aesthetic form, Dujardin produced that remarkable work *Les lauriers sont coupés*, wherein he attempted to record with scrupulous precision *every* action, gesture, word, thought, emotion and sensation experienced by a particular character over a specific duration. Such an enterprise, which cannot properly be called literary, is in any case impossible. Dujardin nonetheless achieved an approximation which, alas, yields only crushing boredom. — Yet this novelist, who turned poet for the 1888 New Year offerings, struck upon the notion — which would have earned him a place amongst the poets had he not previously written solely in prose — of fusing verse and prose in his poem *Pour la Vierge du roc ardent*. But was this genuine intuition, or merely accident? For this poem, judged on its own merits, might well appear a futile exercise. Still, in all fairness, we must acknowledge that Dujardin was the first to attempt this marriage of the two literary forms; and whilst his prose may want for vigour and his verse for poetry, his ambitions remain praiseworthy.

Maurice Barrès grasps the essential aesthetic imperatives of our age — formal, synthetic, mystical; untouched by contingency and bringing art as near as possible to pure thought, into the Soul itself where, had the poet so chosen, the symbolic décor required by Fiction might equally find sanctuary. This is his method in his book[127]: proceeding through successive states of soul, first outlined through what he terms concordances, then evoked through his protagonist's reveries.

Each vision of the universe, with its mediating images and particular atmosphere, distilled into one emblematic episode; — the initial scenes, hazy and rather abstract, honouring the dimness of recollection and emerging from a

guarded youth that transformed everything into dream; — select details, carefully chosen, accumulating as we draw nearer to the present moment of writing; — until finally, in one minutely observed evening, our analyst abandons himself to the vagrant impulses of mind and heart.

Here we have the psychological novel's design. The execution nearly matches it. The shortcomings are those of a lesser Stendhal conscious of his deficiencies. What he lacks is a mind so thoroughly critical that it transcends critical opinion altogether; what he lacks is ignorance of his own rare sensibility's worth. I do not demand unconsciousness from this writer at this juncture; rather, I hope for a consciousness so intense it forgets its own watching, sees only what is watched, eliminates between observer and observed all the machinery of technique and studied pose — eliminates the dandy's gesture that betrays this genuine heart, this heart of sincere artifice, perhaps feigning shame at being a heart at all. — Barrès errs chiefly in subordinating his almost consummate art to the baser dictates of psychology given free rein. He has stopped short of Fiction. He declared too hastily that the time had come to write. And yet, what exquisitely elegant prose! Consider these lines:

Borne upon this vast river of thought that runs confined between sunset and dawn, it seemed to him that the river, now overflowing the narrow channel of a single night, would burst its banks and sweep him across the whole expanse of life. The rapture of comprehending, unfolding, vibrating, harmonising self and world, becoming filled with images at once indefinite and profound! Those beautiful eyes glimpsed within oneself, brimming with passion, knowledge and irony, intoxicating us whilst withholding themselves, revealing of their secret only this: "We are of your race, ardent and disheartened."

Nothing is so wanting in this artist as faith; and, symbolically, faith's very form is likewise absent: Verse.

Jean Jullien (*Trouble-Cœur*) may lack a sufficiently deliberate aesthetic programme, yet his instinctive return to the primitives offers us precious testimony.

Henri d'Argis (*Sodome*), who made the error of saddling his first book with a sensational—and frankly misleading—title merely to attract readers (though he will spare us *Gomorrhe*), hovers between openly symbolic art and documentary realism. He would profit from understanding that the latter is but a stepping-stone to the former.

Paul Margueritte, despite several works of varying merit, remains the author of *Tous Quatre*, one of this generation's finest achievements and a book that shows the most penetrating grasp of the harsh new psychological realities facing literary creation.

Here, however, I draw the line on this survey of young writers. Despite their varied guises, they know one another by certain hallmarks—and many bear them all: mysticism; synthesis in thought or expression; the influence of science wedded to religious feeling; formal liberation bent on achieving rarer means for more powerful effects; symbolism; a return to first principles. Little would be gained by showing how, beside these seeking and striving poets and artists, other young writers—old before their time—are merely going through yesterday's motions. Little would be gained by measuring the death-throes of naturalism, by cataloguing those who ape the late Parnassians, or by listing the new novelists pandering to the salon crowd. Between these various breeds of irrelevance and the poets and novelists whose work and convictions I have sketched above, few would dispute where the Future truly lies.

The Critics

I ought to have given Émile Hennequin pride of place here, had not death cut down the hopes we all invested in him. Alas, he no longer belongs to the Literature of Tomorrow—that literature where, as both critic (our sole true critic) and creator, he would undoubtedly have claimed a magnificent rank. Those who knew the man grasp the injustice of this bereavement, our sorrow, the void left behind that no one can fill; they loved him! and grasped the writer's worth; they admired him. I had the honour to count myself his friend, and our time together has left me with undying memories of sweetness and nobility. In that capacity, let me be permitted this homage, and this overwhelming regret that he is gone—he on whom we pinned our hopes, struck down on the very threshold of his scarcely opened work, and—not without selfishness, though he would have pardoned it—that this surest of counsels, this unerring judgement has vanished too, along with the work and the friendship.[128]

Nearly all our young writers moonlight as critics: Bunand, Émile Michelet[129], Téodor de Wyzewa, Georges Doncieux Geffroy, Félix Fénéon—each with an unquestionable feeling for genuine Art.

Yet whilst I'm far from denying Criticism its due respect as a form of writing, I see no reason to linger over it in a book consecrated to Art itself and to Artists, for whom the Critic serves merely as an informed witness.

Commentary on a Future Book

Introduction

"In abstraction, dream and symbol."

M. Taine

Until Science finally arrives at its inevitable destination in Mysticism, the intuitions of Dream forge ahead, already celebrating this marriage—still to come yet already sealed—between Religious and Scientific sensibility in an aesthetic celebration where humanity's profound desire to reunite all its powers through a return to original simplicity reaches its apotheosis.

This return to simplicity is the whole of Art. Genius, like Love and like Death, consists in liberating from accidents, habits, prejudices, conventions and all contingencies that element of eternity and unity which shines beyond appearances, deep within every human essence.

The singular, unity—here is the affirmative, divine number. The plural decomposes and negates. Great artistic ages speak of Art. Mediocre ages speak of the arts. Great ages dawn and close societies: first the Poet takes in the world at a single glance, with a single thought, and what he conceives, he expresses in a single gesture. Then details claim his attention, and expression shifts from the simultaneous to the successive. For this analytical task, the Poet—once also guide of men and priest—fragments his own being, steps down from the throne, abandons the altar: the Poet becomes the artist. But the artist too gradually splinters; the sublime symbol of the Lyre grows antiquated, preserves an archaic resonance in the silent music of verse, then vanishes altogether, and the artist dwindles into the craftsman of literature, the craftsman of music, the craftsman of painting. This is the age of division and mediocrity. But gradually analysis, exhausted by its own enterprise, permits the craftsman to recall the artist, and the artist, peering into remotest antiquity, catches sight of the Poet's quasi-divine form. Then a great new and ultimate age is born, and as analysis had fragmented Art into the arts, synthesis restores Art to its primitive, central Unity. Still, we must reckon with those ephemeral elements that make up life—with space and time. Space and time inevitably split Art into two camps: the arithmetical camp of Poetry and Music, the geometrical camp of Painting, Architecture and Sculpture. To fuse both camps into perfect unity, to return sound and light to the single, primordial vibration—this is a superhuman conception, impossible save in God. Yet both camps represent twin effects of the same ideal radiance. They share a twofold unity—of cause and effect, of origin and end—a twofold unity, one might say, at once central and peripheral, within the common consciousness of the Poet and his witnesses. For these periods of artistic concentration coincide, providentially, with the twilight of gospels, and the Poet resumes his priestly office from humanity's dawn; what Musician and Painter articulate in these moments of synthesis is the bedrock of all human longing and belief; it is humanity itself in the threefold reality of thought, feeling and sensation: the Musician's word and the Painter's word affirm the same truths, and in the sublime image the Poet impresses upon minds through the senses, the boundaries of immediate artistic expression dissolve—Verse conjures faces and landscapes before the listening soul; Colour summons poems and symphonies before the watching eye. Synthesis

in Thought, in Idea and in Expression. Metaphysical Art. Aesthetic religion, the ultimate religion. Nevertheless, each Art must remain itself, mirroring through symbolic means, as it were, the effects of its sister arts. These means we shall examine for literary art—the others lie beyond my province.

Restricting ourselves, then, to our precise subject, let us observe: that the great Analysis of the last three centuries now commands this age to embrace the logical imperative of synthesis; that having studied man successively in his soul, in his sentiments, and in his sensations through a literature of precision that borrowed its methods almost entirely from the geometric arts (which are fixed and static), the work of the new poets is, in essence, to **EVOKE THE WHOLE OF MAN THROUGH THE WHOLE OF ART**—preserving, naturally, the virtues of the geometric arts, whilst enriching them with poetry's distinctive resources and those of the other arithmetic arts, which are sequential, fluid, and ever-shifting: the law of Rhythms succeeding the law of Proportions; that Analysis necessarily had to immobilise its singular object, arrest it, and thereby express it, whereas Synthesis, to render its threefold object, must seize it alive, in its composite unity, in its very movement, and can therefore only suggest it through the shadings and notations of literary form; that classical Analysis, studying the soul's elements in isolation, romantic Analysis, studying the elements of feeling in themselves, naturalist Analysis, studying the elements of sensation in themselves, could each be satisfied with expressing their particular object as extracted from its surroundings—but Synthesis cannot lodge itself in pure psychology of passion, nor in pure sentimental drama, nor in pure observation of the immediate world before us, for in each domain it would equally risk abandoning Synthesis to relapse into Analysis: hence the manifest necessity for symbolic Fiction, emancipated from both geography and history.

Analysis has been sorrowful, for it is the spirit's exile, the splitting of the inheritance; it compels us to forget eternal Truth and forces Art to replace it with fragmentary, temporal truths; it is, ultimately, Art's abdication of its rights to Beauty, its duties towards Beauty. Synthesis restores the spirit to its native ground, reunites the inheritance, summons Art back to Truth and likewise to Beauty. The synthesis of Art is **THE JOYOUS DREAM OF BEAUTIFUL TRUTH**.

(Here let us append, without troubling over smooth transitions, several observations vital to grasping both this formula and the concluding passages that follow.)

Thus your duty, Poet, and your right, form one indivisible, inalienable whole. It is your own joy (and thereby you wondrously embody the duties and rights of every human being, which are to find happiness). Yes, to satisfy yourself, to draw forth from within the book you long to read—where your heart would flower, where your spirit would find fulfilment—your own joy. Yet remember, since you wield an instrument of artifice to recreate nature—artifice, which is to say intelligence—you are bound to intellectual nobility, and your joy must be of the mind. Otherwise, how much more fitting than any work of art would be the simple freshness of young flesh in water, or the frivolity of wine and game! Yet even your sensual pleasures must find their satisfaction through your art's creation, for none of your actions can exist save through the convergence of all your essential powers: everything depends upon the atmosphere's hue where this essence of yours, from wherever it springs, elects its home.

Be both miner and goldsmith of your own gold. Before you feign and write, before you exercise imagination and aesthetic sense, know where to anchor yourself in reason; think before you sing—let your beauty be the splendid veil of your truth. And this thought of yours—never state it baldly. Through plays of light and shadow let it perpetually seem to reveal itself whilst escaping, endlessly enlarging such gaps to marvel the attentive and receptive reader who follows you to the final full stop, where it will burst forth magnificently whilst still preserving the subtle aura of fruitful ambiguity, so

that those spirits who have accompanied you find themselves rewarded with the tremulous joy of what feels like discovery, the illusory hope of a certainty that shall never arrive, and the reality of exquisite doubt.

Thus protected by this initial wisdom of eschewing precision, you shall venture further, Poet, through your own intuitions kept independent, further along even purely rational paths than the most systematic philosophers—and your pen shall become your talisman for discovering truth. When they accuse you of obscurity and complexity, answer that words are thought's clothing, and all clothing veils; that the grander the thought, the more it requires veiling, as we shield with glass the flames of torches and suns—yet the veil conceals only slightly, the better to reveal more, and more surely.

Never to conclude. This law, the supreme law of Art—the finest have missed it: Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Leconte de Lisle. Sainte-Beuve understood it.

This charge of obscurity hurled at the new poets is nothing but vulgar impertinence—one that people might spare themselves through simple adherence to the elementary rules of courtesy. When you visit someone, conversing with them and listening, must you not set aside your personal troubles and outside attachments? Must you not meet them with mind and heart swept clean of your own habits and memories—accepting, for instance, whatever lighting or décor they have chosen? Reading is a spiritual visit, and courtesy demands that readers traverse whatever corridors and antechambers the author has designed to reach his thought. My spirit resides in my book, and I arrange and adorn my dwelling as I see fit. Yet my pleasure and caprice flow logically from my temperament: if that temperament favours twilight's tender mercies over the harsh glare of noon, what gives you the right to object? You wouldn't dream of expressing astonishment at my 'eccentricities' if you wouldd only consider that crossing my threshold binds you to observe my customs and suspend your own. After all, my door swings both ways—as does my book.

This right to originality, to the New, is so fundamental that even that most beloved of poets, Alfred de Musset, when attempting to define Poetry itself, establishes it at the outset:

Chasser tout souvenir et fixer la pensée

[Banish all memory and fix the mind].

This duty incumbent upon the Poet—to banish memory so as to better contemplate his own thought—becomes equally binding upon the reader who would contemplate the Poet's thought in turn.

The manifold ideas that run parallel or perpendicular to the central conception must harmonise within the total music, must play variations on the theme, must accompany the melody.

Never should one strain at the work. Nothing matters more than preserving the freshness of first impression; and just as manual labour coarsens the hands, intellectual labour too often warps the mind—and warped minds breed only corrupt works. Hence verses fare better when written by moon's indolent light than by the lamp's industrious glare. Better to intimate the idea as it lived before any attempt at execution than to render it through labour's inevitable distortions: assault an idea with too much direct force and you inevitably shatter it. Yet work all the harder beforehand, that you might work less in the moment of creation: blacken page upon page with analysis to ascend to synthesis—then strive to forget them once you have arrived.

The artwork stands as a negotiation between the artist's temperament and nature itself.

It must therefore present two faces: one natural and esoteric, the other human and exoteric.

Yet this humanity isn't synonymous with pity—with that evangelical sentimentality, whether English (Dickens) or Russian (Dostoevsky), that values a single tear from a child's eye above all the works of genius. We speak instead of

a higher humanity, even if prouder, less tender yet stronger—that somnambulant quality of existence which these very novelists, to their glory and our delight, have so miraculously captured.

Nothing new can be uttered in a virgin language: such a tongue would be utterly barbarous, incapable of inflection or modulation. As languages age, they acquire—along with that phosphorescence of decomposing matter—that subtle pliancy which permits ideas to slip into minds less crudely prised open. This explains why formal neologisms, rather than enriching a language (save in vanishingly rare instances), impoverish it, and why the accomplished writer shuns such pointless violence. He knows that literary language comprises a modest stock of beautiful words, yet words of inexhaustible wealth through the echoes and harmonic interplay of their syllables. He knows that beyond mere meaning, assonance and alliteration forge musical phrases of wondrous novelty and boundless suggestion—resources infinitely more precious than inventing some precise, fixed grammatical arrangement of meaningful sounds. This miraculous resource enables artistic form to become the very symbol of the symbol, wherein metaphysical fact fulfils itself in beauty. The writer knows too that within words themselves, in their very meanings, a kind of intimate neologism emerges through verbal marriages, through shifts from literal to figurative, through returns to etymological roots. Thus the word revolves beneath our intellectual touch like a geometric solid furnished with angles and facets—revealing, according to our chosen perspective, only certain faces whilst keeping others shadowed. For myself, I cherish words aged to extremity, those resembling worn medallions, indistinct and smooth. They have drawn near to language's fundamental elements, and the elementary beauty of their syllables better serves—without snagging the eye on particular details—those arrangements within the grand musical phrase I mentioned, that phrase echoing the ample Latin and French period which unfurls in order and magnificence, collecting along its course, like colouring tributaries, its suggestive dependent clauses. — But naturally this language, long shaped to the form and genius of the mind and race it moulds, this gorgeously aged and exquisitely decayed tongue, shares almost nothing with the vulgar idiom of streets and newspapers—yet it commands every last treasure in the national hoard of expression. The accomplished writer masters the classical tongues, knows medieval language, and doesn't even scorn borrowing from provincial dialects—so wonderfully French, so logical, so nimble.

The bloom has faded from our national traditions. Yet anyone may still plunder the cosmopolitan herbarium of legends for those admirable pretexts for fiction it harbours. Pretexts for fiction, I say, for to take these legends wholesale and merely polish them up may be a worthy, even exquisite exercise, but it yields no work of art.

Shakespeare's audience believed in witches, Homer's in gods. Our own believes only in nature's forces: hence we must seek out nature's most secret recesses to hear divine voices and diabolic incantations.

The occult sciences constitute one of Art's chief foundations. Every true Poet is an initiate by instinct. When he reads the grimoires, they awaken secrets whose virtual knowledge has always been his.

The physical and psychic fever to which modern life has brought us is, for writers, at once a mighty resource and a terrible danger. We bring things to fruition faster than our fathers did, but we see far more things demanding fruition than they ever glimpsed. Spiritual serenity eludes us save at the price of unceasing creations that remain unfinished—projects, rough sketches at most—and this condition of imperfection, this sort of resignation one must maintain to produce any work at all, strikes the best amongst us as an almost shameful sacrifice. How we envy those Alexandrians, busy with their secondary subtleties, or those Tang dynasty Chinese poets who savoured without pride such artless delights:

Les fleurs tombent et les oiseaux s'envolent!
[The flowers fall and the birds take wing!]]

An elementary truth, yet worth restating: vital emotion and aesthetic emotion are two distinct things (though destined to merge ultimately). Life is the raw material harbouring aesthetic possibility; Art is Life wrought according to certain chosen interpretations. Picture this: a painting of a wounded nude. If lust or pity stirs you first, either you lack

the artist's eye or the work lacks artistry. If your eyes delight first, if then your mind awakens and your feelings and sensations follow suit—solely because your whole being resonates—you have experienced genuine artistic emotion. Art has addressed you in its native tongue, which here means line and colour, and your inner life has entered into joyous communion with the vital sense conveyed through Art's own signs. So too in literature. Unless the living beauty of words first beguiles you—that triumphant and meaningful beauty which annexes to the writer's soul and his readers' a province of Life, a province till then bereft of meaning—the work fails as art or you fail as audience, however graceful or grave the fancy involved or the problem posed. This is why Illustration in painting and Narrative in literature meet Art's requirements only under the most particular and exacting conditions—and belong to it, in truth, but rarely. Doubtless they remain necessary, like virtually all drawing-room music, to that vast majority whose entire cerebral life boils down to three elements: lust, sentiment, and curiosity.

This public curiosity—especially regarding matters amorous—becomes downright voyeuristic in the theatre. Contemporary theatre reaches its crowning effect when it displays before a packed house precisely what should never be witnessed: the tender vows, the stolen kisses.

And yet Art does immortalise Life's very tremor—but a life at once concentrated and glorified in its cerebral realm. Which is why every artist must shun the servile copying of surfaces, and the poet must embrace the necessity of symbol. Only through symbol can that intensity of living which no mere transcription could capture be distilled and evoked. Living Truth remains Art's aim, nourishment, and glory—though not the immediate Truth of vulgar sincerity, the truth of the witness box, the newspaper report, or even the passionate psychological probe.

Joy in art is not mirth. Joy is solemn, in harmony with all life's manifestations; and if it must forbid any, better laughter than tears. Joy has wings, it soars—yet never without revealing, if only to mark the heights attained, the eternal earth far below, itself made beautiful by all that receding space. Joy resonates between Light and Truth, their common ground, partaking of both. Joy, in sum, is ideally human within the spiritual terms of our humanity.

Woman in Art! She is both object and aim. She lends Joy its wings, on condition she may clip them too, and Joy wouldn't have Woman otherwise than she is, blessing those forms that make the soul weep and the female creature that makes us yearn for the angel. Never forgetting that the angel's soul often transfigures these divinely animal forms, this lovely vessel from which the dream that once despaired now drinks its consoling draught.

If somewhere in Art's universal museum, Poet, a poem exists—Painter, a canvas—that utterly satisfies your hunger for ideal beauty, then cross your arms: your work is done. The artist is one for whom every great work of art throws open a door upon the unknown—never sets a boundary stone.

Which is why this present book (perhaps worth writing for what I will call historical reasons). We both know, you and I, to what hesitant stammerings tête-à-tête would reduce it, and how much I have left unsaid that had to remain unspoken. You know too how many false pages must, through personal frailty or iron necessity, accompany the one true page, the page this book still announces and ordains—you know, you understand, and you forgive.

These observations gloss the future prologue to the work, the *vestibule* of that literary monument which a poet of our time dreams of raising—destined in all its parts (parts he might enumerate and which, echoing and recalling one another, transform a succession of books into a single book, and indeed conceal within their arabesques one unique book, distilled and composed from the essential portions of each diverse volume). Let us now indicate, in practical terms, taking this prologue as our example, not the idea's flowering in the mind, but the successive process of its realisation: for once the idea has thrilled into being—whether through the nuances it summons or through any of the developments that fantasy offers up in advance—the Poet, to endow his Dream with logical eternity,

first scrutinises its meaning in rational terms, then submits it to his imagination in the guise of an image, and finally selects the colours and sounds through which, by way of that image, he will reach thought itself.

Synthesis in Metaphysical Thought

We must first establish that Art is the soul's journey back into its own depths, where it casts off every shackle in pursuit of joy and understanding—of both the world and itself. This defines the metaphysical atmosphere pervading the entire work, the essential and primary significance of this Prologue.

Yet such freedom, such liberation, by its very nature reveals the world's disorder. Freedom constitutes the natural order; if everything that lives remains enslaved, then nothing follows nature's laws. And there is indeed no freedom in this world. Each life finds itself chained to another—to a vice, to the artificial obligations that define Society as we know it. The mind instantly grasps that this return to oneself through natural freedom creates an exceptional state, that reclaiming Order through freedom places the soul bold enough to attempt it in singular solitude.

This is the very solitude one must cultivate within the soul "to hear God's voice". From these three cardinal virtues—Freedom, Order, Solitude—there springs immediately a feeling of limitless power, the Infinite's own counsel. At once the soul knows with certainty its own eternity within this exceptional solitude, understanding that death no more exists than birth, that true life means *being conscious centres of infinite vibration*.

Gradually, across the screen of thought, there drifts—vague at first, then crystallising—the pristine model of Humanity: that archetype from before time, which the ages have mirrored in those few sublime figures memory has rescued from history's night and declared divine.

From this ideal reality, contemplated in its atmosphere of the Absolute, emanates a moral faith and the unshakeable conviction that our only human duty is to rise as far as possible towards this ideal. We sense that this great Countenance comprehends all; that it forms the human centre where divinity's currents descend and ascend; that it is what our eyes unknowingly seek when they turn skyward; that it embodies the Perfection whose memory inhabits every living thought—the archetype against which we unconsciously measure those faces we call beautiful, those souls we call noble. It is *the human Beauty of divine Truth*, a metaphysical realm where the secret soul of all things finds exaltation in the flower-like eyes of this sublime and enchanting humanity; where the sound of its voice breathes soul into nature's every voice; where everything in this divinely human being reveals the hidden meanings linking all natural kingdoms. It is *the human conscious centre of infinite vibration*, from which the Messiahs and Religions drew their revealed grandeur—gradually, through gospels of physical security and privation, then sensual freedom and joy, then spiritual security and sorrow. And from this being itself, directly contemplated through the prismatic Fables, Art shall in turn reflect the Religion of Beauty, the worship of spiritual freedom and Joy.

AND TO THE POET GRANTED THIS VISION, ART REVEALS ITSELF AS THE GAZE AND VOICE, THE NATURAL GESTURE OF THIS IDEAL HUMANITY.

Ideal, yes—but how remote from every soul throughout the ages! This gesture would remain shackled by the dead weight of appearances and conventions, were the hour not even now striking for

deliverance—calling humanity back from the absurd smallness of those shattered pedestals where it had mounted its own statue, returning it to the proper grandeur of a consciousness that understands: humanity's glory in the world lies not in being the questionable elect of some phantom crown, but in accepting its role as Nature's genuine minister and intimate. Here Natural Science steps forward to seal with Metaphysics a fruitful pact: Science confirms those truths that time's passage has obscured yet which live on in their cryptic tongue—truths discovered by the magi, the astrologers and magicians, the alchemists and kabbalists before and after Christ.

The Poet hears this hour strike and rises to meet it. Free and solitary in his soul, who could stop him from entering the kingdom of joyous order, following intuitions grounded in the testimony of antiquity's mysterious scholars and fortified by the endorsement of today's clear-minded scientists?

At this point, Society looms before the Poet as a potential and formidable barrier.

This has nothing whatsoever to do with Rousseau's worn-out formula. Society does not inherently corrupt man, any more than man is born without base instincts. Society is one of the painful conditions of humanity's present transitional state—the crystallisation of our inner weaknesses, a wall we have built between our souls and God, a wall where time has carved grimacing faces that mock eternity, a veil thrown over nature herself. There is no point in rebelling against society, and to let oneself be "corrupted" by it would be to fall victim to childish anger. The only answer is to escape into the soul's inmost sanctuary. The Poet's function is neither revolt against evil nor charity towards the wicked—neither the clenched fist nor the hand stretched downward, but the finger raised upward, pointing the way for those who have eyes to see.

This religion of Beauty, moreover, will never be universal—not if the Crowd should ever again drown with its great artless din the vapid babble of a "reasonable" populace. (For where might we hope for renewal through the beneficent surge of a child-people? And even if it came, such a torrent would likely sweep away the ideal vision with everything else!) Humanity, in truth, has never consisted of more than the smallest minority of free spirits amid an immense majority of slaves.

Here the Poem's *thought* reaches its completion. The first of the three acts that compose the aesthetic action has accomplished itself: Fiction stands ready to be born.

Synthesis in the Idea. Fiction.

"Poetic Fiction" has always worked to stir wonder at what lies beyond our grasp, conjuring the illusion of another world—whether by casting the poem into distant ages or propelling its action to the earth's remotest corners. Analysis, by contrast, requires no such invention. Operating as it does within the realm of deliberate unreality—isolating what in life remains fused—it generates its own wellspring of illusion. Hence some writers embrace fiction whilst others renounce it: most Classicists and Romantics choose the former path; certain Classicists, some Romantics, and all Naturalists take the latter. One might indeed gauge the human and aesthetic truth of these three schools by observing how liberally they employ fiction, or how rigorously they refuse it.

Great modern writers—Balzac, M. Barbey d'Aurevilly—appear to spurn pure Fiction, though not from any inability to wield it. Rather, they recognise that this simple retreat through time and space offers too blunt an illusion, one the steam engine has rendered obsolete. This explains why Romantic theatre has become poetically intolerable: its gestures towards beautiful Deception collapse, geographically at least, beneath the weight of travellers' accounts. Temporal distance might still enchant us, but history has devoured time as ruthlessly as the railway devoured space. The great Flaubert, in Salammbô—still a marvel of prose—expended prodigious genius stripping illusion of its temporal remoteness, documenting and particularising historical detail until the ancient world stood solid before us. Today, tellingly enough, this method has descended to M. Sardou.

As for Balzac, the visible, contemporary world itself became his Fiction. This visionary perceived familiar demons stirring in modern souls, agitated by passions both petty and vast. M. Barbey d'Aurevilly, meanwhile, births his heroes within his own soul and lives their fictive existence himself—a man dwelling beyond the world even as he moves through it.

Beyond the world—not simply beyond familiar dates and places, but beyond the world itself: here lies fiction's fundamental law.

Beyond the world, yet never beyond humanity or nature. A soul, a flower, a body: these belong to eternity. The poet may take his own moment as starting point (though he need not), and there is peculiar pleasure in watching a beautiful vision transcend the very hour that birthed it. A historical detail, woven into the fabric of such a vision, can strike us with strange force—as though the poet were gently mocking the grand pretensions of nations. The vision itself, slipping free of its own constraints, may even wear the mask of everyday reality, provided it knows the way home[130].

The poet prefers to work through pure invention—creatures as fantastical as mythological chimeras, as strange as the enchantments of fairy tales—to give his thought symbolic form.

In the present case, how better to symbolise the soul's liberation from itself and from society—its soaring return to humanity's original splendour—than through angel's wings, beating their rhythm through the indefinite towards the infinite?

Yet to establish this being's exceptional nature required his birth amongst men ashamed of their offspring: for to the wingless and earthbound, a winged child of man must appear monstrous, his presence both stupefying and shameful. Thus the angel must enter humanity as a monster—the product of teratogeny, scarcely more unnatural than a child born without arms. This monstrous child, his family's disgrace, will mature in shadow, feared, scorned, imprisoned in a cell that preserves the family name.

Here is fiction pared to its essence, yet sufficient—with the promised satisfaction of watching the monster claim his angelic birthright.

As a saint amongst libertines, a poet in the commercial quarter, any Exception amongst the ordinary, this soaring being becomes an object of hatred to all who encounter him—save the singular soul of the woman destined to produce this exquisite aberration of nature. Since the husband's authority (he who never forgave the miracle and nearly throttled the fabulous infant) forbids the mother from seeing her child, mysterious correspondences flow between them, transporting her unknowingly into an extraordinary realm whilst preserving the angel's human feelings—correspondences that animate nature around them both, binding the maternal soul so tightly to her angelic child that she will perish the instant his wings unfold.

Yet a Poet might never discover his genius without some great catastrophe—these wings would never spread if the persecuting household, growing accustomed despite themselves, allowed their hatred to wane. Imagine, then, an "ordinary" child maturing as the angel's younger brother. The horrific being is concealed from this child above all others—a child naturally talkative, certainly impressionable, raised as future consolation to abhor the extraordinary. Neither this education nor the mystery he immediately senses proves barren: education instils the desired unshakeable convictions, whilst mystery sharpens curiosity and cultivates intelligence. Thus the atmosphere surrounding the angel breeds genius, though evil men transform this genius into a sublime expression of their own baseness. The child matures: he uncovers the secret; he beholds the angel. What the Angel speaks and what the man replies forms the book's core. This dialogue should kill the man; instead, he loses his reason, temporarily, and his madness, still shot through with terror, demands the removal of its cause: they unlock the angel's prison, and the angel soars away, singing...

Now imagine this tale recounted by the Angel's own brother to a Poet in a Landscape that listens and speaks—and the Poem's Fiction stands complete.

Synthesis in Expression. Suggestion.

To render this fiction directly, stripped of its unfolding complexities, would be no art at all. Such an approach could convey meaning only through bald statement, achieving no more power or beauty than the plain assertion: 'Art is deliverance.' What we must do instead is make that deliverance felt—unfurl those wings with syllables that at once catch the light playing white and silver across them and sound the supple, harmonious tremor of their plumes; give breath to those troubled, contradictory faces gathered round the mystical prisoner, each harbouring the same secret beneath every thought, every feature; make palpable within a single household how the spirit of affirmation and the spirit of denial contend with nearly equal strength; let the very cadence of words pulse with the heartbeats and imagined caresses of mother and son's occult union; summon up between this man and the poet the whole living world of things that rises against the brilliant folly of one who thinks himself worldly-wise; and when the angel speaks, when the man speaks, let us recognise without announcement that here is a man's voice, there an angel's. We must, in short, convince that rare reader he has passed into a realm beyond the everyday and his own existence—for he now carries memories of a life unlived, believes his mind possesses some touchstone by which to know an angel's voice. We must, in other words, lend truth the lustre of illusion.

Suggestion achieves what plain statement never can. It speaks the language of affinities—those hidden threads between soul and world. Rather than hold up a mirror to things, it slips inside them and becomes their voice. Never stale, always urgent and particular, suggestion gives words to what lives unspoken in the depths of things. It can make even a threadbare word strike the ear as though newly minted. Most vital of all, because it speaks from within what it describes, it speaks just as intimately within those who receive it: like sound calling forth echo, it awakens in the prepared mind a sense of the impossibly sayable. Scorning the dead conventions of workaday prose, it shuns the frigid precision of the laboratory; instead of naming a colour, it conjures the sensation—particular or universal—that the colour creates; it neither catalogues a flower nor mentions it in passing, but adds to the flower's living presence the emotion it stirs. Through suggestion alone, a handful of lines can hold the endless shimmer and tangle of details that bald description would labour through pages to enumerate.

What's more, suggestion—unlike bald expression, which so often batters language into submission or drains it of life—pays homage to our linguistic inheritance. It honours only those traditions that still pulse with vitality, resisting the impoverishment of our tongue, remembering Rabelais and the Troubadours who wielded words with such grace, demanding that readers rise to the full measure of language. Indeed, it honours language all the more deeply because it refuses mere habit or servitude, reaching back instead to the wellsprings of speech itself—to those primal laws that govern how the sound and colour of words answer to thought.

By this same law, the poet chooses the essential form—prose or verse. I have already hinted that the synthesis so many pursue by melting verse and prose into some nebulous hybrid might be better achieved through a union where each keeps its distinctive character while serving both the immediate moment and the larger design. Let me press the point further.

Verse, I have argued, is bounded by the measure of human breath: twelve syllables mark its natural limit. But verse is also—as I have observed—essentially a surge of exaltation, a flash of enthusiasm that neither can nor ought to last. Hence its need for prose. For a century now it has been clamouring for relief. Lamartine prophesied that verse would vanish altogether, that prose would eventually suffice for all literary expression. If anyone understood this, surely it was Lamartine—he who gorged himself on verse and must have felt the sustained lyrical pitch become unbearable. Yet no: verse will not vanish. It will simply cede more territory to prose, as is only right.

The route by which prose and verse have drawn together is plain enough. At almost the very moment when the Romantic poets began taking metrical liberties, loosening the corset of classical verse, Aloysius Bertrand was composing the first prose poems. Sainte-Beuve made verse more supple still, bending it towards prose—nearly tipping it over the brink. But then Baudelaire restored the grand lyrical line to full vigour. In Les Fleurs du mal, though, lyricism runs in slender, quintessential streams; here is poetry distilled, fewer arrows but each one sounding deeper, great verses that scarcely announce themselves yet echo into the distance. I sense between the individual pieces of Les Fleurs du mal vast unspoken intervals, an entire prose book that Baudelaire merely held in contemplation. And this same man who bound verse within lyrical limits was simultaneously writing the second generation of prose poems. The Parnassians drew the Poetics tight once more: but Paul Verlaine restored all the Romantic liberties and more besides, scattering caesuras everywhere, recreating halting rhythms—whilst also establishing the true distinction between verse and prose, the one synthesis, the other analysis. He went further still. In his verse tales[131]—L'Amoureuse du Diable, L'Impénitence finale—he blended lyricism with rhymed prose. This was the penultimate step that wanted taking, and what answer shall I receive if I ask: why set prose in rhyme? When the tone demands that we abandon lyricism, why not descend frankly to authentic prose? Frankly, yes, but not headlong—and here the prose poem serves admirably as harmonic bridge. One can imagine a book where, following the pulse of emotion, the style would fall from verse to prose and rise from prose to verse, with or without the prose poem as go-between, rocking itself, when employed, in rhythms that through alliteration and assonance would herald and summon Number and Rhyme until finally attaining them—and would seldom relinquish them without the warning of a gradual diminuendo, for calculated effect.

This weaving together of prose, prose poem and verse seemed almost ordained by the very subject of the poem I have sketched above. The widest arc of those parallel swings between thought and expression is traced by analytical prose at one extreme and the alexandrine measure at the other.

The alexandrine is the quintessential French verse. For all the protests against it, the line possesses infinite suppleness, equally apt for evoking the infinite and the finite. It accommodates every rhythm, even the irregular: what forbids us from making it stumble deliberately on mute syllables at nine or eleven beats, only to restore at the crucial moment the sonorous majesty of its full twelve? This verse is the complete organ, the entire orchestra; it sings as readily in the minor key as the major. And I speak of the alexandrine in its most consecrated form, the rhyming couplet, which offers no resistance to the ode, nor even to the fixed-form poem, where one can frame it with a system of shorter lines that rhyme internally with the grand verses and call to one another across the poem like musical motifs held in perfect governance by the richness and precision of the closing rhymes. Rhymes trace the luminous trajectory of every poem. Why choose them at random? Given that sounds possess tonal colour for

any particular temperament, why not subordinate the entire rhyme scheme of the poem to a governing rhyme, whether opening or central?

Just as the poem is but a single sentence, so the verse is but a single word—and this is precisely the meaning of the verse's capital letter, that initial which we must resist abolishing at all costs. But who could imagine a word severing itself from its sentence? The true verse, then, lives fully only where the poet's will has set it. This is why we must condemn the proverbial verse—so quintessentially French, people suppose, and alas, they are hardly mistaken. The French temperament, through an excess of logic, suffers from aesthetic poverty. Our poetry is neither vague enough nor concentrated enough. Our vague poets slacken beyond measure; our concentrated poets constrict beyond endurance: Lamartine, Baudelaire. And this is what drove the Decadent movement, in its bid to endow French poetics with the virtues of English or German verse, to manhandle the Latin instrument. Yet even by exploiting our very failings, we can envision magnificent poems in our language, and here, most succinctly, is their design:

Extraordinarily vague verses hover about the idea, engaging it through its shifting meanings, orchestrated through successive and preparatory misreadings foreseen in advance and echoed afterwards in the surrounding prose, deferring complete meaning into the beautified radiance of a distant dawn. Then, once the essential atmosphere has been established, a sudden crystallisation of this dawn reveals the truth in a verse at once numerous and rich, yet precise—precise yet mysterious—which contains the entire poem on the strict condition that the whole poem be read. The idea then asserts itself through fresh developments, themselves concentrated by a return of that singular verse or merely one of its elements, perhaps a hemistich, and thus the entire work unfolds, now given over to the logical caprice of imagination, now held fast by the enchanted verse, serving as the capital, so to speak, of that realm at once so brief and so boundless: the work of art.

Notes

[1] Reading collections of parliamentary speeches is equally instructive. Berryer, Montalembert retain some interest, at least a possibility: Gambetta, the most recent of these times' "great orators," is utterly intolerable, owing to the gibberish.

[2] M. de Villiers de l'Isle-Âdam.

[3] Scientists have, in the Poet's eyes, yet another fault, doubtless linked to the one just stated, more apparent than it, but, all told, less grave and one which more or less legitimate reprisals excuse: formerly literature had invaded the domain of science, today science invades that of literature. Reprisals and reactions without human responsibility.

[4] I say the *learned* and not the *writers*. On the contrary, the latter have enriched the language with novelties—which, moreover, the learned do not accept without protest. But the creative faculty of writers is that very faculty of the Crowd: Intuition. It is the old *rem tene, verba sequentur*: a new *thing* demands a new word and conjures it up, without vain searches for roots and endings, through a return, perhaps, to that omniscient ignorance of the first man, *who designated with a name each of the beings and each of the things that God had just created.*

[5] Pathologie, tératogénie, pachyderme, cortical, etc…

[6] I am, of course, not speaking of poets whose devotion was purely religious—like the Hebrews, for example, whose prophets and psalmists did indeed write for all, precisely because in doing so they wrote also for themselves, sharing with the multitude but one and the same concern: God.

[7] One wouldn't wish to suggest any lack of appreciation for that book, but one admires still more the Œuvres Philosophiques, where, it must be feared, minds "a cut above the average" will find less pleasure and less clarity than in studies of more ordinary life: yet if they have taken the necessary pains to properly grasp *Louis Lambert*, *Séraphîta*, *La Peau de chagrin*, *La Recherche de l'Absolu*, and so forth, their spiritual development will have profited thereby.

[8] See: III, Influences nouvelles [New Influences]

[9] M. Leconte de Lisle.

[10] M. Théodore de Banville.

[11] M. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.

[12] M. H. Becque.

[13] M. Vacquerie.

[14] M. François Coppée.

[15] Though in this book of pure Aesthetics—albeit Aesthetics grounded in Metaphysics—one intends as far as possible to abstain from philosophising for its own sake, we must nonetheless offer some approximate definition of a word we shall employ more than once and which, in the principal sense used here, is not beyond definition. — God is the first and universal cause, the final and universal end, the bond between minds, the intersection where two parallel lines would meet, the fulfilment of our half-formed wishes, the perfection answering to our dreams' splendours, the very abstraction of the

concrete, the unseen and unheard yet certain Ideal of our yearnings towards Beauty in Truth. God is, par excellence, the "mot juste"—the precise word, that is to say, that unknown yet certain verb of which every writer has an indubitable though indiscernible notion, that evident yet hidden goal he will never reach but forever approaches as closely as possible. — In practical aesthetics, so to speak, it is the atmosphere of joy where the triumphant spirit disports itself, having reduced the irreducible Mystery to Symbols that shall not perish.

[16] Edmond et Jules de Concourt, *Manette Salomon*.

[17] M. Paul Verlaine.

[18] One ought properly to pause at the fifteenth century of Italian painting. Living faith—universal, unquestioned—was the wellspring of all those masterpieces in bloom. But a comprehensive historical survey is not the aim here, and the simultaneous decline of Art and Faith seemed to offer more compelling proof. Moreover, this entire book maintains an exclusively French perspective, mentioning foreign poets only when they have exercised notable influence upon us.

[19] We shall return later to the literary significance of this seventeenth century that opens the modern era: here we are concerned only with Literature's evolution around religious Ideas. (See: Formules accomplies [Accomplished Formulae].

[20] "The lowest of men, after those who admire him." Joseph de Maistre.

[21] Nothing in French music. On the contrary, this was the great century of German, Protestant music; but as Literature is the main focus of these studies, the other arts are neglected here. Yet they would certainly not contradict the theory. To take Painting alone, for instance, the era of the great painters closes on the eve of this eighteenth century and reopens the day after. And from the Primitives to Leonardo da Vinci, from Vinci to Veronese, from Veronese to Murillo, Art and Faith advance or retreat in lockstep.

[22] A. de Vigny.

[23] "The narrow moralities of old will give way to the broad sympathy of modern man, who loves Beauty wherever Beauty may be found and who, refusing to mutilate human nature, finds himself at once pagan and Christian." M. Taine.

[24] M. Paul Verlaine.

[25] I haven't forgotten his theatre or his lyric poetry, but this part of his work hasn't contributed most to his glory: for it is indeed above all through his Contes and his Fables that La Fontaine has done his part for his century. [In the original French, Morice writes "la tâche de son siècle" (the task/work of his century). However, the word "tâche" (task) is virtually identical in sound and nearly identical in spelling to "tache" (stain), differing only by the circumflex accent.]

[26] I see no need to belabour the literary language of the seventeenth century, nor to detail how medieval naïvetés gave way to the logical clarity of Latin and French genius; how the very structure of style emerged in those regular, forceful constructions, in those impeccable and majestic periods. All such matters have already been treated admirably by M. Nisard in *Littérature française*.

[27] The first of these two propositions contains this truth: it is good to tell man he is capable of goodness, for this restores the inner confidence without which his will remains barren and cowardly.

The second contains this falsehood: it is wrong and illogical to tell man that society serves only as an agent of evil and misery within him, since society is necessary and since he himself created it.

[28] Yet for those with even the slightest taste for anecdote, here's one among many similar tales that Thomas Moore relates in his *Memoirs of Lord Byron*, which seems rather telling and shows us the despairing poet quite willing to smile at his own fame. Moore had joined Byron in Venice: "He had ordered dinner at some trattoria, and whilst we awaited it, along with Mr Scott whom he had invited to join us, we settled on the balcony to savour, before twilight quite faded, some glimpses of the Grand Canal's vistas. Looking up at the clouds still glowing in the west, I remarked that 'what struck me most about Italian sunsets was that rosy tint peculiar to the country.' Scarcely had I uttered the word 'rosy' when, clapping his hand over my mouth, Lord Byron said with a laugh: 'Come now, damnation! Tom, don't go getting poetical on me.' Among the few gondolas gliding past us, one at some distance carried two gentlemen who appeared to be English; and noticing they were looking our way, Lord Byron, setting his fists on his hips, exclaimed with comic swagger: 'Ah! John Bull, if you knew who the two fellows standing here were, I fancy you'd goggle your eyes!' / [This anecdote brilliantly exposes the paradox at Byron's core. The despairing Romantic who built his reputation on melancholic verse here literally silences his friend for being "poetical" about a sunset—only to immediately strike a pose and preen over his own celebrity, addressing the English tourists as "John Bull" (the personification of England). The juxtaposition is perfect: Byron simultaneously mocks the very sensibility he trades in whilst revelling in the fame it has brought him. This is precisely Morice's point—that Byron was both author and amused spectator of his own myth, capable of playing the tortured soul whilst thoroughly enjoying life and glory. The self-aware irony here suggests that his cultivated despair was, at least partly, a performance he could step out of at will]

[29] *Kunst und Alterthum*. 1820.

[30] One should add Macpherson's *Ossian*, *Paul et Virginie*, and *Clarisse Harlowe*—these three sources of inspiration, while secondary in merit, are by no means secondary in influence. All three helped inflame to the point of sentimentality the three feelings that underpin all Romanticism: the heroic sentiment, which in Ossian troubles itself with no reality whatsoever; the feeling for nature, which Bernardin de Saint-Pierre corrupts with the most nauseating puerilities; and finally sentiment proper—the sentiment of love besieging virtue that resists and laments (Rousseau's snivelling becomes in Richardson a torrent, a cataract, a deluge). One should further add the Spanish dramatists and the Romancero. But the Romantics found in them only what they had already discovered in Shakespeare: the external appearance and the movement.

[31] A single novel by Walter Scott would refute these harsh judgements: Ivanhoe. This book stands alone in the English novelist's work, and is indeed extraordinary for its time.

[32] M. Gabriel Sarrazin, in a forthcoming volume, *La Renaissance de la Poésie anglaise*, at last provides the comprehensive study of Shelley we have long awaited. See also M. Rabbe's biographical volume accompanying his translation of the poet of Prometheus Unbound.

[33] We must except Lamartine, who delights in visions of happiness, even if tinged with melancholic joy, though he is, no doubt, easily satisfied.

[34] Another did as well: Heinrich Heine. Despite his actual nationality, Heine is, alongside Musset, the most thoroughly French of poets. His wit is French; his common sense is distinctly un-German. He

writes of Legends, yet lacks the feeling for them that, say, Schubert possessed. His masterpiece (Reisebilder) is a work entirely French in spirit.

[35] "In what was finest in it," not in what was most distinctive. As we shall see, if it were a matter of the latter, it is Théophile Gautier who ought to be named.

[36] *La Chute d'un Ange.*

[37] "Criticism is the conscience of Art." — Ernest Ilello.

[38] *La Critique scientifique.*

[39] If we are to understand that M. Zola intended *Le Rêve* to demonstrate the extent to which Naturalism admits and embraces transcendent realities, then more's the pity.

[40] It's curious that the Moderns, like the Ancients, have treated incest—which is only a vice because society has decreed it so, incest which Israel practised religiously—with excessive timidity. Phèdre's incest is merely one of affinity, as is Renée's, as is that of M. Caraguel's Barthozouls. René's incest would be genuine, but remains confined to desire. Only Zo'har's is at once genuine and consummated. Yet on this subject, and quite uncharacteristically, M. Mendès transforms himself into a stern moralist —rather artificially, I suspect—and speaks only with horror that condemns the beautiful transgression he has just described in a style nonetheless enamoured of it.

[41] Amiel.

[42] M. de Goncourt.

[43] Ibid.

[44] A single Poet sometimes achieves—though still imperfectly—this life of the crowd: Michelet, in his *Histoire.* Michelet, one of this century's greatest poets, remains without influence on the art of the future. A case to be examined elsewhere, not in a few lines. For other causes yet the same reason, this book has had to neglect a figure of the Duke de Saint-Simon's magnitude.

[45] Joubert.

[46] Baudelaire.

[47] Carlyle.

[48] "An article, a page, is something achieved at a stroke, like a child: either it is or it isn't. I never think about what I'm going to write. I take up my pen and write. I am a man of letters: I ought to know my trade. Here I am before the paper: it's like a clown on the springboard... And then, I have a very orderly syntax in my head: I toss my sentences in the air... like cats! I'm certain they'll land on their feet. My entire worth—and they have never spoken of this—is that I am a man for whom the visible world exists…" No one is unaware who Masson is in *Charles Demailly.*

[49] M. Théodore de Banville.

[50] A. de Musset.

[51] "...He withdraws into himself, marshals his forces, and fears to act in haste. This perpetual student knows that for him, work means reverie. His dream is nearly as precious to him as all that one loves in

the actual world, and more formidable than all one fears there. Along each path of his life, he gathers and hoards the treasures of his experience like stones proven and sound. He keeps them long in reserve before setting them to work. He selects from among them the cornerstone of his monument. Around this foundation he traces his design, and when he has contemplated it from every angle, remade and remodelled it, only then does he permit his hands to obey inspiration's impulse. Yet even in the work itself, he remains constrained by his love of the ideal, by his ardent pursuit of perfection. Dissatisfied with all that fails to enter the pure order he has conceived, he distances himself from his work, averts his gaze, forgets it for long stretches before returning. He does more—he forgets the very epoch in which he lives, and the men who surround him, or if he observes them, it is only to paint them. He thinks solely of the future, of his construction's permanence, of what peoples yet to come will say of it..."

[52] Sénancour is so forgotten that I think it appropriate to cite here some preferred passages from Obermann, scattered throughout. "May I once, before death, say to someone who understands me: If only we had lived! — ... Thus, seeing in things relationships that scarcely exist there and seeking what I shall never obtain, a stranger in actual nature, ridiculous amongst men, I shall have only empty affections; and whether I live according to myself or according to men, I shall have in external oppression or in my own constraint only the eternal torment of a life forever repressed and forever wretched. — ... A jonquil had bloomed. It is the strongest expression of desire. — ... I am ashamed of the business of civic life. — ... Opposing my enemies with this conviction that places me inwardly beside man as he ought to be. — ... I ask whether happiness isn't a child's dream. — ... I am condemned to await life forever. — ... I feel only what is extraordinary. — ... I know not satiety; I find emptiness everywhere. — ... As for me, I began to dream instead of taking pleasure. — ... Impatiently seeking what doesn't interest me... — How many unfortunates will have said, century after century, that flowers were granted us to disguise our chains, to deceive us all at the beginning and even help keep us bound until the end! They do more, though perhaps in vain; they seem to hint at what no mortal mind will fathom. If flowers were merely beautiful before our eyes, they would still seduce; but sometimes, this perfume carries us away, like a blessed condition of existence, like a sudden summons, a return to more intimate life. Whether I have sought these invisible emanations or they offer themselves, surprise me, I receive them as a powerful yet precarious expression of a thought whose secret the material world contains but veils... To hope, then hope no more, is to be or be no more: that, surely, is man. But how is it that after the songs of a stirred voice, after the perfumes of flowers, and imagination's sighs, and thought's soarings, one must die? And it may happen that, fate willing it so, one hears a woman full of loving grace secretly approaching, and that, behind some curtain, but certain of being clearly visible in the sunset's rays, she shows herself without other veil, for the first time, quickly withdraws, and returns of her own accord, smiling at her voluptuous resolve. But afterwards, one must grow old... If I reach old age, if one day, still full of thoughts but renouncing speech with men, I have beside me a friend to receive my farewell to earth, let them place my chair on the short grass, and let tranquil daisies be there before me, under the sun, under the immense sky, so that in leaving this passing life, I may recover something of the infinite illusion. — Man's real life is within himself; what he receives from outside is merely accidental and subordinate. Things act upon him far more according to the state in which they find him than according to their own nature."

[53] Among the most beautiful and least known passages, we should note the historical pages that conclude the volumes of Le Rhin in certain editions. Victor Hugo there achieves historical synthesis. These pages, empty of facts, full of thoughts, quite exceptional in all Romantic output, are perhaps,

along with moments in Michelet, what best achieves history proper in our literature—this futurition of the past.

[54] We know Monsieur de Banville's worship of Hugo. Messieurs Barbey d'Aurevilly and Goncourt seem to escape him. But Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire, Flaubert and Monsieur Leconte de Lisle owe him much. Messieurs Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Mallarmé, and Verlaine maintain their respect for him.

[55] This idea belongs neither to Balzac alone nor to Vigny. Victor Hugo knows it; Lamartine attempts to realise it: *Jocelyn*, *Les Pêcheurs* (lost book), *La Chute d'un Ange* are episodes of a single, immense poem. But it's Balzac who has taken this idea furthest.

[56] "With much patience and courage I would create, on nineteenth-century France, that book we all regret—which Rome, Athens, Tyre, Memphis, Persia, India unfortunately didn't leave us about their civilisations, and which, following the Abbé Barthélemy's example, the courageous and patient Monteil had attempted for the Middle Ages, though in an unappealing form." This historical viewpoint, quite prominent in the pretensions of the *Rougon-Macquart* series as well, is at once secondary, false, and dangerous. Secondary and almost useless, for what does the historical reality of customs and a civilisation's social physiognomy ultimately matter to future civilisations? The legacy of thoughts and images survives revolutions and alone matters: the clothes worn by men long dead whose words still govern us can only prompt idle curiosity. But this viewpoint is false because it isn't human: it forces whoever adopts it to imagine themselves in the place of people who will come two hundred years hence. Yet nothing is more urgent and vital than to live one's true life sincerely, one's contemporary life, and to make one's thoughts as a person of this time flower most beautifully within oneself. But can we imagine a succession of generations whose highest geniuses would have no other concern than to compile for the future a faithful historical tableau of the moment's customs? To what future would such works dedicate themselves, since it would also be the future's task to add its own page? — And besides! Who can know what about us will interest the twenty-first century? Perhaps there were many histories of civilisations in Alexandria's library. From a poem, verses survive that defy fire because they are themselves flames: from a history book... — Moreover, this historical viewpoint carries the great danger that, by turning genius's eye away from itself, it risks making us lose the only history that interests us, that stirs our passion: history itself, the inner history of this unique soul. — This history Balzac has given us, despite himself, and because his genius wouldn't allow him to remain always at the little window he had chosen—too small for his infinite gaze.

[57] See Émile Hennequin's article in the 8 November 1883 issue of the *Revue Wagnérienne*: "Wagner's Aesthetics and Spencerian Doctrine".

[58] "One might say that when religion becomes artificial, it falls to art to save religion's soul by restoring the figurative value of those mythic symbols which religion takes literally, thus illuminating the truth contained in their ideal representations. Whilst the priest endeavours to treat religious allegories as factual truths, the artist, by contrast, openly and freely presents his work as the fruit of his own invention. Yet religion can only survive for art insofar as it cloaks its dogmatic symbols and veils its element of truth beneath an ever-mounting heap of incredibilities imposed upon faith. Religion has sensed this, which is why it has always sought art's collaboration—though art itself could not reach its highest development whilst obliged to represent this supposed reality of symbols in the form of idols designed to encourage sensual worship and ritual, and has fulfilled its true mission only when it has facilitated the understanding of the inexpressible divine truth contained within religion through an ideal representation of its allegories."

[59] The French Edgar Poe is now complete, thanks to Stéphane Mallarmé's magnificent new translation of the Poems.

[60] The expression comes from M. J.-K. Huysmans.

[61] "Edgar Poe is the last foreign Poet we shall consider here. Others might seem indispensable to this survey of synthetic attempts and influences, however brief: Hoffmann, for instance, and above all Carlyle. But Hoffmann represents an exception—what a delightful one!—rather than an influence. As for Carlyle—more philosopher than poet anyway—his thought will surely leave its deep imprint on the rising generation. Unfortunately, his work remains untranslated. (We have good reason to expect that this much-needed translation is not far off.)

[62] J.-K. Huysmans.

[63] J.-K. Huysmans.

[64] From the Lévy edition. The portrait in the Lemerre edition is more mediocre still.

[65] From the Parnassians I except MM. Verlaine, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Mallarmé.

[66] I speak from the standpoint of form: as regards substance, on the contrary, in writings such as Un cœur simple, Flaubert has specialised more than any other; yet even in this very specialisation of a rudimentary soul, he has only general ideas to deduce.

[67] As for Sainte-Beuve's personal work, entirely one of egotistical psychology, it is sufficiently characterised by the very form he invented; like the form, the thought wavers between the fear and the desire to say everything.

[68] To this work, as we have seen, Baudelaire was no stranger; but it seemed logical, Baudelaire's influence being more upon substance than expression, to treat it before discussing the wholly formal Parnassian doctrine.

[69] I cite a passage from a recent work: *Nos Poètes* by M. Jules Tellier—though I cite it... with emendations.

[70] "Thus, in the calm silence of nights, in those hours when the pendulum's oscillating tick grows a thousand times more terrible than thunder, when celestial rays touch and caress the naked, living soul, when conscience finds its voice, when the poet distinctly hears the dance of rhythms freed from their ridiculous envelope of words—in these hours of painful and sweet contemplation, often, oh! often! I have questioned myself with dread and trembled almost to the marrow of my bones. And who, pondering this, would not tremble at the thought of perhaps living amongst a race of gods, among beings who perhaps read our thoughts as easily as turning pages whilst theirs remain hidden from us beneath triple armour of diamond! When one considers it... The mystery of childbearing has been entrusted to them, and perhaps they understand it... Perhaps there exists a solemn moment when, were the husband not lost in stupid slumber, he would see his wife hold his palpable soul between her hands and tear from it a piece that shall become his child's soul."

[71] *La légende de Parnasse contemporain*.

[72] "The soul and charm of modern beauty: physiognomy. Depth, reflection, the smile come into the gaze and the eye speaks. Irony plays at the corners of the mouth and glistens, like a touch of light, on

the lips it parts. Wit passes across the face, erases and transfigures it: there it quivers, there it trembles, there it breathes; and setting in motion all those invisible fibres that transform it through expression, making it supple to the point of manner, lending it a thousand shades of caprice, guiding it through the finest modulations, endowing it with every kind of delicacy, the spirit of the eighteenth century moulds the woman's face upon the mask of Marivaux's comedy, so mobile, so nuanced, so delicate, and so charmingly animated by all the coquetries of heart, grace and taste." — This is said, as one sees, apropos of the eighteenth century. But from the very first words, which I have underlined for this reason, who can fail to hear that M. de Goncourt speaks here of an idea that has become universal for him, of a characteristic belonging to this century at least as much as to that other? — One further note. Nearly everything I say of M. Edmond de Goncourt should properly be divided between him and his brother. While naming only the elder as representative of the two brothers' admirable union, let no one suppose I forget, in the gratitude owed him by all who revere the Art of writing, the one who is no more.

[73] "Enclose it within the matrix of dead languages; press it in their iron mould: it will emerge struck like a coin, without burr and clean as La Bruyère's diamond-sharp language. I am not telling you, of course, to sleep with Latin books, to translate them; what matters is that genius of language which one must catch by surprise, feel, and carry away; for as to knowing them by heart and never leaving them... Look, here's another problem and another puzzle: have you noticed—how very strange it is—that nearly all lovers of fine Latinity possess a style most contrary to the style in whose intimacy they live?" (Charles Demailly.)

[74] M. Paul Verlaine: *Les Poètes Maudits.*

[75] Charles Murice: *Paul Verlaine.*

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] M. Paul Verlaine: *Les Poètes maudits.*

[79] These four verses which may perhaps convey my admiration: Adonaï! In the Latin terminations Of green-moiréd skies bathing vermillion Brows, And stained with pure blood from celestial breasts, Great snowy linens fall upon the suns.

[80] We should not forget that M. Mallarmé has published *Les Dieux de la Grèce* as well as volumes on English linguistics and translation.

[81] From *Le Guignon* by Stéphane Mallarmé:

Ils pouvaient faire aussi sonner comme un tambour La servile pitié des races à l'œil terne...

[They could also make resound like a drum The servile pity of the dull-eyed races…]

[82] Several of those that appear in Part V of this book. A forthcoming Study, as thorough as possible, will moreover explain what we can merely indicate here concerning M. Stéphane Mallarmé's work and ideas.

[83] I don't suggest M. Loti has never encountered a charming legend in his travels; he has duly relayed it: our thanks. But heavens! that hardly warrants M. Bourget's "the divine Loti." — Nor do I suggest M. Daudet has never struck upon a felicitous phrase: I could cite several, even in L'Immortel, regarding the

Seine. But that scarcely entitles this pleasant raconteur, all cheap tricks and no substance, to the extraordinary daily privilege of seeing his name sandwiched in the press between M. de Goncourt and M. Zola.

[84] I'm being rather generous in counting the representatives of this generation. I'm tempted to salute M. Arsène Houssaye here. Besides, there are evident similarities between the pale figures of all the transitions—from Romantics to Parnassians and from Parnassians to Décadents.

[85] I refer here to the versifier. We'll see the critic presently.

[86] There's also M. Fabié, "poet of Rouergue," H. Delthil, "poet of Quercy"... who knows who else!

[87] When M. Paul Verlaine (Romances sans Paroles) shows us Belgian or London landscapes he traverses, all the interest for us lies in the Poet's soul, in the correspondence between that soul and the landscape—it's what these landscapes teach us of humanity that matters. When Flaubert shows us the desert where the Saint dwells, or the vast plains crossed by the mercenary army, it's the feeling—sadness, pitiless immensity—that nature imposes upon man, it's the feeling and meaning the Poet draws from the spectacle. Quite the contrary with the versifiers I have just named: they are enamoured—moderately, mind you—of visual details whose meaning they don't seek and which they copy like humble photographers.

[88] This name appears and I must discharge it. M. Sully-Prudhomme is no poet. Of the three acts composing aesthetic creation (Thought, Idea, Expression), he manages only the first, and that insufficiently, his abstractions never transcending worn generalities. As for the sentimental "poet" who forms this philosophical "poet's" other face, I believe he has already joined in mankind's thankless memory those romance-mongers of the First Empire, with Reboul and Dupaty; his saccharine tenderness rings hollow—this lover surely always sported grey locks. They claim M. Sully-Prudhomme contains yet a lyric poet, deputised to deliver official verses before fresh statues: Baour-Lormian awaits him at Paradise's gate.

[89] *La Vie Inquiète* and *Les Aveux*. Otherwise I would mention Edel and verses scattered through reviews, destined for M. Bourget's forthcoming collections.

[90] Emile Ilennequin.

[91] Yesterday the pamphlet was defunct; the chronicle had drowned it: the Restoration's slim brochures surrendered to journalism's present deluge. M. de Rochefort's Lanternes seemed throwbacks. Today the pamphlet resurfaces as brochure and book, infiltrates the novel, colonises philosophical and social inquiry; our pamphleteers include MM. Bloy, Mirbeau, above all M. Drumont, a philosopher of the most exalted Catholic pedigree, and others still.

[92] The Critical Spirit seems to be mistaken here for Criticism itself. But clearly the latter is merely the product of the former. Since it preserves the former's characteristics in reduced form, it has become its personification.

[93] Jean Dolent, *Amoureux d'Art*.

[94] The formula invites criticism; philosophically speaking, the phrasing lacks rigour. In Art, are there really Truths beyond Dream itself—each artist's particular dream? Yet I grasp his meaning perfectly, as will any reader.—We should note that M. Jean Dolent has authored several novels: *Le Roman de la Chair,*

L'Insoumis—penetrating modern studies of passion—and *Les Parades de Jean Dolent*, distillations of a most individual wit.

[95] For the Present threatens to forget them overmuch.

[96] Émile Hennequin.

[97] Rather than didactic procedure—successive studies devoted to those diverse points where new Art distinguishes itself from accomplished Art—we preferred the method of a broadly and freely historical criticism, deeming it paramount to demonstrate how innovations spring from tradition. This approach precluded certain developments whose absence leaves this book incomplete: theories of Novel, Theatre, Poem—(books, perhaps, for the future). Moreover, as the old "genres" increasingly tend to dissolve into the singular and essential Written-work-of-art, it bears repeating that we neither sought nor could produce here the manifesto of a School that does not exist.

[98] I need not enquire what conditions perfected Industry will impose upon Poets—when that age dawns of machines definitively and universally supplanting human labour. That this ultimate phase of progress would consummate universal wretchedness and will likely never exist save in the ghastly visions of philanthropists, I am convinced, though this is not the place for full exposition. I need only record the circumstances of this present instant, a "transitional moment," our sociologists proclaim, and if I grasp their meaning, the majority of the living already anticipate that mechanical golden age which shall be their dominion, already deafen the earth with the appalling clamour of their coming, already begin to repel those exceptional souls, those minds born sovereign: for not only would their native and sacred sovereignty perpetually affront Mediocrity Enthroned, but they would find neither sanctuary nor purpose in a world where nothing exceptional can henceforth arise.

[99] See in particular Charles Henry's study in the *Revue Indépendante*, vol. VII, no. 19 (May 1888): Cercle chromatique et sensation de couleur; and by the same author in the *Revue Contemporaine*, vol. II, no. 4 (August 1885): *Une Esthétique scientifique*. "This scientific path will doubtless lead us towards understanding the laws of that superior and delicate harmony of noises and sounds. Needless to say, poetics must henceforth reckon with rhythmic numbers: through classifications of rhythms it will gain the science of possible metaphors. A metaphor in spoken or written language is simply the feeling of a relation linking two more or less similar changes of direction: the subtler and deeper the changes, the more complex the formula, the more beautiful the metaphor." — I don't dispute the compelling interest of such research, but I confess its practical value for Art utterly eludes me. I can scarcely picture a Poet consulting his "classification of rhythms" before hazarding a metaphor. Our expression symbolises our dream, our dream symbolises our thought; everything springs from it, everything radiates from it: the complete emotion of its secret life—this is what we must possess, and this is what any scientific procedure threatens to corrupt. Nor can I imagine a painter consulting the Chromatic Circle before risking a particular tint. — Yet Charles Henry doesn't presume to subordinate artistic creation to scientific aesthetic principles: "Science," he writes, "can never create beauty—I speak of relative science and leave aside whether 'absolute science' might be a contradiction in terms. The feeling of beauty resolves into perceiving infinite rhythms with minimal effort, that is, in the infinitesimally small of time. But these elements lie beyond our control. Just as a geometric figure's beauty resolves into feeling its formula, so the beauty of a being or form resolves into feeling its formula, which is merely a special case of the universal formula. To create beauty, one would need to possess the universal formula: but would possessing it mean understanding it? And when humanity approaches this problem, might it not thereby revert to Nature's unconsciousness?" — Still, according to Henry, science "should spare the artist futile hesitations and experiments by showing the path to ever richer aesthetic

elements: it should equip criticism with swift means to identify ugliness that, though felt, often defies articulation." — But are these hesitations and experiments that science promises to spare the artist truly futile? Might there not be considerable merit in going astray? Does book-learning match lived experience? And isn't the artist's native sensibility more trustworthy than any geometric proof? Let Henry point out a single flaw in a Rembrandt that knowledge of Aesthetic laws would have prevented. — This leaves only the potential resources such an Aesthetic might offer criticism. But here again, as Émile Hennequin observed (*Critique Scientifique*), Henry can analyse only the pleasingness of visual and musical artworks, not their beauty—beauty being wrought as much from discord as from harmony, if not more so. The aesthetic and the normal share no common ground." Put simply, scientific methods excel at revealing nature's patterns: but genius and its works are anomalies, and whilst they too follow natural laws, they bend these to their own peculiar logic, which differs from universal logic as surely as theatrical perspective differs from nature's own.

[100] Had I not confined myself strictly to French Art, I should certainly discuss the English Pre-Raphaelites. Here I can only attest to my profound sympathy for an aesthetic conception that, above all others, accords most harmoniously with my own Ideal.

[101] Note in passing that this creative impotence of modernity in architecture and furnishing, coupled with our taste for antiques and exotic curios—a taste resembling old men's passion for the very young —signals most starkly that the present cycle of civilisation is closing. Man is not a finished creature; if he finds nothing further on his current path, he will not cease walking but change direction. The very creations discussed here bear witness to the hour that strikes through their synthetic character: they are terminal products, flowers bent so far from the maternal stem that they droop to earth, nearest the single common root, their long branches spent.

[102] Three albums are to appear: Fêtes Réelles, Apparitions, Chant de l'Océan. The first, purely architectural, presents the new monuments. The second, a broad commentary on the first, reveals through figures the origin and motive of architectural lines whilst showing, in pure fictional light, the marriage of coloured rhythms with these lines; the third, reaching further still, raises structures upon the sea itself, building with the very waves constructions forever governed by the law of human reflection. This third album achieves the impossible and, as its title proclaims, is a "Song". Elsewhere we hope to expound fully the thought and work of Albert Trachsel.

[103] *De la Vérité et de la Beauté*, p. 27.

[104] I trust there's no need to elaborate how Literature and Journalism, despite sharing an alphabet, remain two entirely distinct Arts. Granted, the old monarchical press could exploit certain lesser intellectual faculties: timing, cunning, a knack for oblique parallels, the craft of insinuation—all deployed to voice what couldn't be stated outright. Soon enough, with all restraints removed, journalism will have degenerated into such a din that even Stentor's Homeric bellow would barely register. (Barring those few established papers still held in check by the ballast of tradition.)

[105] So acutely does this generation, fragmented though it may be, grasp the true direction of its course, that whilst several championed Wagner, M. Jules Christophe does the same single-handedly for Balzac. Balzac and Wagner, the luminous centres, in the past, of all the new Art! Even today, in a literary journal, *La Cravache*, edited by young writers of considerable talent, M. Christophe each week reverently transcribes passages from Balzac.

[106] Today, under the publisher M. Savine and the direction of M. de Nyon, the *Revue Indépendante* combines, one might say, monarchical with democratic principles. It welcomes, without sectarian spirit, everything that bears the stamp of talent, whilst entrusting to an annual critic the task of indicating the periodical's true direction. This arrangement, which inherits all the faults and virtues of both systems, has made a splendid start with the shrewd and wilful analyses of M. J.-H. Rosny, critic for the inaugural year. The *Revue Indépendante* is unquestionably now the principal voice of the younger literature.

[107] Baudelaire: *Bénédiction*.

[108] Laurent Tailhade: *Sur champ d'or*.

[109] *Amis*.

[110] *L'âme nue*.

[111] See Chapter V for the theory of French verse.

[112] Jean Moréas, *Les Iconostases*.

[113] Belgian. One of the curiosities of the so-called Decadent movement is that, whilst so thoroughly French in its Baudelairean and Verlainean origins, it was, in the latter days of its most clamorous phase, virtually commandeered by young writers of races foreign to our own.

[114] René Ghil: *Traité du Verbe*.

[115] Charles Vignier: *Centon*.

[116] Mathias Morhardt: *Hénor*.

[117] Ernest Jaubert: *Poëmes Stellaires*.

[118] Edouard Dubus: *Soir de Fête*.

[119] Jean Court: *Les Trêves*. In a novel, Jean Court has attempted to synthesise an entire life; a woman lies dying, very slowly, and throughout her agony, as though stepping outside herself, she witnesses the drama of her past life, which becomes foreign to her save for what it harbours unknown to all: a cherished sin that the dying woman, devout Christian though she is, still prefers to paradise itself. The book, divided into four parts marked by four phases of a sunset, is nothing but a succession of sensations, dreams and memories where everything mingles—the happiness of the past and the terror of the imminent future. Rather grandiose, the title *Le Soir tragique*.

[120] Henri de Régnier, *Episodes*.

[121] Others have taken the same path. Let me mention only the poet Stanislas de Guaita and the novelist Joséphin Péladan. Here are two artists in the finest sense of the word, and had I undertaken to discuss all our young writers, I should have been bound to find room for the poet of Rosa Mystica and the novelist of *Le Vice Suprême*—though not without reservations concerning the latter's most regrettable lapses, his prose too often redolent of the feuilleton, and the theatrical contrivance of his method. But I repeat: this is no catalogue. The poets I have selected suffice for the demonstration I wished to make. Yet let these names of worthy writers also be set down here: Vielé-Griffin, Paul Adam, Stuart Merrill, Darzens, Mikhaël, La Tailhède, de la Villehervé, Jean Lorrain, George Lorin, Guigou, Bozaire, Clerget,

Michelet, Victor Margueritte, Louis Marsolleau, Ajalbert, Bunand, Leclercq, Randon, Tellier, Vallette, Aurier, Roux, Quillard, Roinard, Barthélemi, Vidal, Brinn'Gaubast.

[122] Need I repeat for prose writers the caveat already noted for poets? Others, and yet others again, might have served equally well as examples alongside those I examine at length. But one must draw the line somewhere, make choices; perhaps I simply left it to chance.

[123] Emile Henneijuin, *Revue contemporaine*, tome III, n° 2.

[124] Francis Poictevin: *Derniers Songes.*

[125] Adrien Remacle: *L'Absente.*) turns on a double patrimony born of adultery. A phenomenon scientifically attested: the enduring imprint, within a woman, of the man who first possessed her. Should she later belong to another and bear a child, that child may resemble—in character and physique—only the first lover, though it may equally embody both lineages.

[126] Édouard Dujardin: *Les Hantises.*

[127] Maurice Barrès: *Sous l'œil des Barbares.*

[128] Bibliography of Hennequin's published and forthcoming works. *Contes grotesques*, by Edgar Poe (translation). *La Critique scientifique*; *Les Écrivains francisés*; *Les Écrivains français*; *Poèmes en prose*, with introduction by Édouard Rod. — Perrin, publisher.

[129] Already noted among the fine poets.

[130] Need I say that none of this forbids the poet from writing a psychological study or whatever else his fancy dictates? The author himself would be the last to impose such restrictions. He claims neither to prohibit nor prescribe anything whatsoever, and all this remains, once again, merely the expression of personal convictions.

[131] M. Paul Verlaine: *Jadis et Naguère.*

Translator‘s Notes
(tn^{x})

1. Morice is saying that this pretentious, ignorant rabble is the disastrous outcome of the "diffusion of enlightenment"—the democratic spread of education and knowledge that was such a cherished ideal of the Enlightenment and 19th century. He's being deeply ironic: what was meant to elevate humanity has instead produced a mob of pseudo-intellectuals who have read the newspapers and think they know everything. The "enormous joke" and "monstrous modern ecstasy" are his sardonic descriptions of how society celebrates this "diffusion of enlightenment" as progress, when in his view it has actually created something grotesque—a mass of mediocre people with just enough half-knowledge to be dangerous, but not enough wisdom to recognise their limitations.

2. This final paradox is the culmination of Morice's entire meditation on art as a mystical practice. In context, it suggests that true art operates as a kind of divine conduit that transcends the artist's conscious intention or understanding. Throughout the passage, Morice has been building towards this idea: art begins where it seems to end, form must dissolve itself to reveal the Infinite, and the artwork becomes a "trembling portal" to Mystery. The artist, then, is not so much a creator as a medium—someone who, through "communion with Nature," channels primordial truths that exceed their own comprehension. This echoes a Romantic and Symbolist conviction that the greatest art contains revelations beyond what the artist consciously put there. Just as the crystal cavern holds infinite potential fires waiting to be awakened, the artwork contains depths of meaning that surprise even its maker. The artist may craft the form, but the Truth that radiates through it—that "divine emanation of the Infinite"—flows from a source beyond human knowledge. It's a humbling vision: the artist as servant rather than master of their art, creating vessels for mysteries they themselves cannot fully fathom. In this sense, art becomes almost oracular—speaking truths through the artist rather than from them.

3. "Digni sumus" means "We are worthy" in Latin. In this context, Morice seems to be using it as a kind of existential declaration or affirmation—as if humanity is being asked by some higher power whether it has proven itself worthy, and the artists of the age feel compelled to answer "Yes, we are worthy."

4. The medieval French language was divided into two major dialect groups named after their word for "yes": the *langue d'oc* in the south (using "oc" from Latin *hoc*) and the *langue d'oïl* in the north (using "oïl," later "oui," from Latin *hoc ille*). Occitan refers to the southern varieties, which produced the troubadour tradition, while Oïl encompasses the northern dialects from which modern French evolved. This linguistic division reflected broader cultural differences between northern and southern France in the Middle Ages.

5. Morice is addressing critics who claim 17th-century French theatre is "anti-national" because it uses Greek and Roman myths rather than French historical subjects. His response is that France's "poetic heritage"—its literary tradition—already encompasses these international works (Arthurian legends from Britain, Italian epics like Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, along with

native French *Chansons de Geste*). These have become part of French literary culture through centuries of reading and adaptation. When he asks "why uproot them?" he means: why should we extract or separate French writers from this rich, international literary tradition that has already become part of our cultural inheritance? This tradition was already "complete" and established when the Grand Siècle began. His point is that true literary greatness doesn't lie in narrow patriotic subject matter, but in capturing universal human truths. The classical writers achieved their "Frenchness" not by dramatising French history, but by infusing universal stories with French sensibility and contemporary relevance. They made Greek heroes speak to Louis XIV's court—that's more genuinely French than mechanically adapting stories of Charlemagne or Joan of Arc would have been. In essence: French literature had already absorbed these international classics into its tradition—why artificially limit writers to purely French subjects when this broader heritage was already theirs to draw upon?

6. Character vs. temperament: In French literary criticism, *caractère* denotes fixed moral and psychological types (the miser, the hypocrite)—the universal traits that classical moralists studied. *Tempérament* refers to individual physical and emotional constitution—one's particular nature shaped by biology and circumstance. Morice suggests La Bruyère nearly breaks through classical universalism to show how individual temperament shapes character, anticipating the psychological realism of the modern novel.

7. Kalidasa: Classical Sanskrit poet and dramatist (c. 4th-5th century CE), regarded as ancient India's greatest writer. Shakuntala: Heroine of Kalidasa's most celebrated play, *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, in which nature mourns her departure from the forest hermitage. Morice cites this as an example of poetry that recognises the consciousness of nature, contrasting it with the anthropocentric worldview of 17th-century French writers.

8. The "School of the Thesis" (École de la thèse) refers to the writers of "thesis plays" or "problem plays" (pièces à thèse), particularly Alexandre Dumas fils and his followers, who used drama as a vehicle for social criticism and reform. These playwrights explicitly argued moral or social points through their work, addressing issues such as illegitimacy, prostitution, and marriage laws. Morice contrasts them with the "School of Good Sense," identifying both as betrayals of Romanticism's artistic promise—one through didactic preaching, the other through bourgeois complacency.

9. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III. These lines describe Narcissus continuing to gaze at his reflection even after death, in the waters of the underworld. Morice employs this classical image to crystallise his critique of Romantic self-absorption—the sterile contemplation of one's own suffering rather than the pursuit of happiness.

10. Latin proverb meaning "Every animal is sad after intercourse" or "All animals are sad after coitus." A classical expression reflecting on the melancholy or emptiness that can follow sexual satisfaction.

11. To shock or scandalise the middle classes—a characteristic Romantic impulse involving deliberate provocation of bourgeois taste and morality.

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